ONLINE RELATIONS

A case study exploring the social, cultural and political value of the internet for exile-Burmese

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SUMMARY

This inquiry explores how exile-Burmese value social, cultural and political aspects of the internet. The empirical basis for the analysis is semistructured interviews with three Burmese in Oslo and nine in London. The analysis is also in part based on research of Burmese-related online web-sites and internet-applications. The study is, however, not an analysis of these web-sites. The approaches focus on how the interviewees value the possibilities the internet offers for finding information concerning Burma, and how they experience the possibilities to communicate with Burmese friends and fellows. Hence, the analysis also aims at exploring whether the internet has any function when it comes to maintaining the interviewees' sense of belonging to a Burmese community, and their sense of identity.

The thesis consists of an introductory chapter where the approaches are presented and significant concepts are explained. A chapter about Burmese history, culture and society follows this chapter. Next, methodologically and theoretically choices are thoroughly elaborated. The analysis is divided into one part concerning social and cultural aspects and another part concerning political aspects. The final chapter presents a critical view on the inquiry.

The analysis shows that the internet may have important functions both socially, culturally and politically. The crucial point is the individual user and the context within which the internet is used. The offline context and the Burmese culture establish significant premises for how the internet is used and perceived.

CONTENTS

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE of the thesis is to explore and describe how the internet functions as a social, cultural and political sphere for Burmese who live outside their own country. During the last decade the debate concerning the internet and new possibilities for online public spheres, individual freedom and democracy has expanded, and is characterised by several contradictory arguments. Hyperbolic perspectives preaching the salvation of the information age meet pessimistic doomsday prophecies of the surveillance age or the belief in a total commercial control reducing the human mind to stupidity.[1] In between are perspectives that try to look at both approaches.

People depend on media for information about the society and for a sense of belonging to a community. Examining how one minority group uses alternative media, and how they perceive the importance of this possibility in relation to their social worlds, is thus interesting and important. In summary this thesis concerns the relationship between the physical and the social worlds of the exile-Burmese.

1.1 THE CASE

My aim is to expand our knowledge of how Burmese use the internet. The empirical foundation of the thesis is semistructured interviews with twelve Burmese, most of them of Burman origin[2] who live in London and Oslo. All respondents use the internet. Three of the interviewees do not consider themselves as exile-Burmese, but are finishing their studies in London, as most universities in Burma are closed. However, I have chosen to call all of the respondents exile-Burmese, based on a definition of exile as "removal of a national from his or her country, or the civilized parts of it, for a long period of time or for

[1] This discussion did not arrive with the commercialisation of the internet, but is typical of theories about the modernisation or postmodernisation of the society.
[2] Burma has seven major ethnic groups: Burman, Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Chinese, Mon and Indian.

life" (The Columbia Encyclopedia 2001).[3] This definition furthers states that a life in exile may be the result of a forceful expulsion or a voluntary removal.

Six of the interviewees either work with the web or are politically active. They are therefore highly experienced users. I will return to what this might mean for the analysis in Chapter III. In addition to the interviewees I have carried out extensive research of Burma-related online resources.

I do not pay much attention to the fact that most people in the world do not have access to the internet. Poor communication infrastructure is a serious problem and it makes no sense (yet) to talk about a general world-wide democratisation fuelled by new information- and communication technologies.[4] Still I assume that the internet changes the situation for those who have access to it. The possibilities that arise are especially interesting for people living in exile or otherwise far from each other and for those who cannot rely on information from their home-countries due to minimal, if any, freedom of speech.

This is precisely the situation for the Burmese. The ruling military regime in Burma controls all national media and uses them for promoting their own interests and views. At the same time the situation in Burma is not a major theme in Western media. Traditionally exile-Burmese (like Burmese in Burma) have few possibilities to follow what is going on in their home country. The technological development the last few years has possibly changed the situation, at least for people with enough economic resources and the right know-how. With the development and the dispersal of the internet, totalitarian regimes have few possibilities to control information outside their own country. Although Burma is in the background of the international news-picture, entities outside Burma now have a very suitable device to spread information without a great deal of capital and equipment.

> Communication technologies shape and change relationships of everyday life and social institutions, from which they also receive their social meanings. As everyday practises are gradually geared into these new channels of articulation, new forms of interaction emerge and others transform. (...) Communication technologies exercise power on both individual and societal levels; in their ability to extend and enforce human action and to mediate social and cultural meaning in time and space (Rasmussen 1996: 1).

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[3] http://www.bartleby.com/65/ex/exile.html [30-04.2001]

[4] According to UNDP a quarter of countries have still not reached a teledensity of 1. 1 telephone for every 100 people accounts for a teledensity of 1, and this is a widely accepted measure of telecommunications (UNDP 1999: 62). There are tremendous global gaps between the haves and have-nots in relation to information- and communication technologies.

Terje Rasmussen's concept "communication technology" includes new media, multi-media, hyper-media, hypertext and interactive media. In other words, these are based on networks and interactivity (Rasmussen 1996: 2). This concept possibly includes more than the internet, even when the internet is, as is the case, broadly interpreted. My thesis is concerned with the internet in the form of different computer networks, and how these networks mediate social and cultural meaning between individuals. Rasmussen's phrase "the mediation of social life" is very useful as it makes clear that communication technologies cannot be separated from processes in the society, or the social and cultural context within which online activity takes place. Throughout the thesis I will stress the importance of context, and the internet as a valuable device, which might make it easier to keep in touch and to obtain relevant information despite great distances and minor coverage of Burmese issues in the mass media.

1.2 FOCUS AND APPROACHES

The thesis explores whether using the internet has a value in the form of less restricted access to information and better possibilities to communicate for Burmese people living outside Burma. What possibilities exist and how are they used? Two general questions are raised:

(1) *How do Burmese value the possibilities the internet offers to find useful information and to communicate with other Burmese around the world?*

(2) *How does the internet contribute to maintaining the social, cultural and political community of the Burmese and does it have any political significance?*

The analysis aims at illustrating the relations between the possibilities to communicate, information retrieval, sense of community, and what all these aspects mean for maintaining Burmese culture and the respondents' identity as Burmese. Being a Burmese in a Western country clearly make such possibilities important and as such, exploring how the internet can be used for support and encouragement is interesting. The last part of the second question needs to be specified. What the inquiry actually explores is how the respondents experience some aspects, which are often emphasised as democratising. This refers to the arguments that almost everything is available on the net, everyone can communicate with

everyone, and that distance inhibits neither information retrieval nor communication. This would potentially ease democratic struggles and co-operation.

Interviewing individuals who need alternative arenas for communication more than the average Western media-overloaded person is a good strategy to get a picture of the social and political potentials of the internet. I do not ask whether using the internet *creates* communities among the Burmese. My focus is rather on already existing communities and what the internet means for the maintenance of these social and political relations. This point of departure sets the agenda for what theories are needed, and they have to be answered in relation to Burmese people.

1.3 COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION AND THE HYPERTEXTUAL INTERNET

Several concepts need to be elaborated before exploring how the interviewees use the internet. In this section I explain how I understand communication, community, computer mediated communication, and finally hypertext.

1.3.1 COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL LIFE

How *information, communication and community* are connected and intertwined has to be clarified, as the concepts are the point of departure of this inquiry. Understanding these connections is especially important when it comes to the internet.

Early definitions of communication tended to focus on the transference of messages from a sender to a receiver.

> In the most general sense, we have communication wherever one system, a source, influences another, the destination, by manipulation of alternative symbols, which can be transmitted over the channel connecting them (Osgood et al. 1957 quoted in McQuail and Windahl 1995: 4).

Denis McQuail and Sven Windahl (1995) show that the development of different (mass) communication models has been in a constant state of flux. Today a linear understanding of communication has generally been abandoned, and context is considered as much more important than before. Early models operated with a very information bound comprehension of communication with clear and stable distinctions between a sender and a receiver of a pre-packaged content. These distinctions are becoming more and more

blurred, and in many cases they do not exist.[5] Communication and information are two sides of the mediation of social worlds, whether this mediation is personal, through traditional mass media or communication technology. Thus,

> (…) there are now so many ways in which interaction is mediated and so many opportunities for breaking outside mass media narratives that it no longer makes sense to struggle fitting communications into dualistic formulations, such as production and consumption, senders and receivers, encoders and decoders (Crowley and Mitchell 1994: 17).

Such distinctions become especially blurred when the internet is the object of the study, since the user is in charge in relation to what, when, with whom and how to communicate. A simple gathering of information from the internet in the same way as through mass media may be important, but communicating and actively taking part in the process are also unavoidably important aspects of such use of the internet.

Ingunn Hagen argues that communication describes the process of making common or the activity whereby messages are exchanged (1992: 21). The concept thus implies a two-way flow. Her point is that communication is a process, whereas information generally is thought of as the content or product of communication. Hagen's perspective seems to be close to that of James Carey's. His ritual understanding of communication clearly contributes to my interest in exploring processes of communication and information retrieval among the Burmese.

> In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as 'sharing', 'participation', 'association', 'fellowship', and the 'possession of a common faith'. This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms 'commonness', 'communion', 'community', and 'communication'. A ritual view of communication is directed towards the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs (Carey 1989: 18).

For Carey, the connections that exist between communication, information, culture, and fellowships are explicit. Communication in various modes constitutes all human experience.

Carey's view on communication is central in this thesis. What is also essential is a qualitative understanding of information and communication with a view on knowledge as a result of a communication process (Enebakk et al. 1999: 106). Information and communication are not as much about quantity as it is about the creation of meaning and

[5] It is important to note that the traditional mass media still function very one-directionally and with defined encoders and decoders of messages.

content. According to Enebakk et al. this implies that *information superhighway* is not the best suited metaphor to describe the internet. This metaphor is too technical, ignoring the qualitative human capabilities necessary in finding and making sense of information on the internet. Messages are not transferred from a sender to a receiver, who quite passively accepts and understands the message in a straightforward way.

Elaborating on the intangible concept of community shows how it too depends on information and communication. Community can be defined in terms of social networks. In this research, community should be seen from a Burmese cultural perspective. The most important aspect is by far the fact that approximately 89 % of the Burmese are Buddhists (CIA World Factbook 1999). I will explore in more depth the significance of religion in the next chapter. At this point I want to stress that neither the Buddhist context nor any "Asian values" necessarily support claims that Asian thoughts about individual freedom are fundamentally different from Western ideas (Mabbett 1998, Silverstein 1998, Maung 1998). The "Asian value" arguments can briefly be said to concern how Asians supposedly attach more value to the well-being of social relationships than to individual freedom. Others argue that the relationship between a belief in individual freedom and the importance of community is not problematic, and both ideas are interpreted as basic human rights. This thesis will follow a simple understanding of community focusing on how the interviewees experience their social relationships and networks.

Peter Kollock and Marc A. Smith (1999) argue that computer networks have a value beyond traditional communication media, as the networks support many-to-many interactions and thus have a group-supporting function. Communication media inevitably create social relations. Communication is not a one-directional flow of information, and the users of communication media create the content. Kollock and Smith illustrate that the concepts of communication and community are tightly interdependent. Whereas mass media are more characterised by a sender-receiver model, telecommunications are *informationally interactive* and/or *interpersonally communicative* (Rasmussen 1996: 126). These modes of information and communication require a higher degree of involvement from the user, and open up space for new communities to evolve. Whereas traditional mass media do not require much activity from the receiver of the message, communication media require more initiative and conscious action due to their dialogic nature.

Discussions concerning social aspects of the internet investigate in what degree it makes sense to talk about online communities and how they eventually relate to other public and social spheres. There are many perspectives, both political and social, on how

the internet functions as communication channels or arenas (Kollock & Smith 1999, Kahin & Keller 1996). Kollock and Smith argue that computer networks create new social spaces. Burmese people who live dispersed in different countries might therefore find decentralised communication forms more suitable than using traditional media. The discussion on the social aspects of the internet in Chapter IV investigates in what degree it makes sense to talk about online communities. Howard Rheingold (1993) claims online communities are real and part of the big society. Others are of the opinion that online associations lack several characteristics before they can count as real communities. Principally, they are too fragile, and the bonds between participants are too week. Such communities are easy to leave, and leaving does not have any real consequences. The network community will be discussed further in Chapter IV.

1.3.2 COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Computer mediated communication (CMC) can be defined as any application related to human communication and interaction in online environments. Computer mediated communication extends modern possibilities to communicate despite geographical distances and, like writing letters and the telephone, CMC provides people with an opportunity to keep in touch. In this subsection I will briefly explain what possibilities CMC offers. This will illustrate why I expect CMC to be an especially useful device for my interviewees.

The Burmese interviewees use email and three of them use some kind of messenger or chat. Messenger is an application where people can have undisturbed, dialogic conversations with other people, whereas chats are public arenas where people join and take part in the often several conversations taking place.[6] In addition there are message-boards and newsgroups concerning Burmese issues. I do not consider it as necessary to go deep into the nature of computer mediated communication.[7] Most important in the context of Burmese is the fact that CMC makes communication across time and space much easier and maybe just as important: keeping in touch through email and messenger software is inexpensive and convenient. CMC is furthermore an extraordinarily effective device for spreading and reassembling information.

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[6] Appendix II gives an example of conversations I have had with Burmese in messenger and clarifies the structure and dialogic nature of these conversations.

[7] For an elaboration of the characteristics of computer mediated communication, see David Kolb (1996): "Discourse across links".

The different forms of CMC can be categorised according to their synchronous or asynchronous nature (Kollock and Smith 1999). Messenger is an example of synchronous communication, whereas emails are asynchronous.[8] In the research process I discovered that Yahoo! Messenger was a frequently used form of synchronous communication, and I have also had informal online chats with several Burmese in different parts of the world. Both the messenger applications from Yahoo and from MSN/Microsoft are very simple devices, easy to understand and they provide arenas for private and undisturbed chats. I have also observed some ordinary chats between anonymous users, and there are considerable differences between the structure of the conversations in a general chat-group from one in messenger. None of the Burmese I have talked to are particularly keen on open and public chat-groups.

The synchronous or asynchronous nature of the communication process obviously influences the character of the discourse between the participants. A quite understandable consequence as synchronous communication is a form of dialogue where the text is a result of the participants taking turns in a conversation-like manner. Neither emails nor chatting are especially complex or mysterious phenomena. Rather they can be said to be the electronic equivalent of writing letters and having face-to-face or telephone conversations. But the technology-mediated nature of the communication-process makes it more rapid and effective. It is not the case though that people have to live far away from each other to see the value of using computer mediated communication. Rather it seems to have the same function as the telephone. People tend to call their nearest friends more frequently than friends living far away (Wellman and Gulia 1998: 179).

The point is obviously that the characteristics of computer mediated communication suit people who live in dispersed relationships or communities. The interviewees presumably acknowledge this aspect when they use email or some chat-device to keep in touch with Burmese friends other places in the world (or in their immediate neighbourhood for that matter). The interviewees will probably express rather general understandings of the advantages of computer mediated communication, and they probably do not use these devices very differently from other people. Nonetheless, I think it is interesting to

[8] An obvious consequence is that synchronous communication technologies take place between people living in time-zones making simultaneous communication possible. In the research process of this thesis I tried to make an appointment for an interview in Yahoo! Messenger with a Burmese man in New Jersey. Our first appointment was supposed to take place at 4 am in the morning in Oslo. I had to cancel when I established this.

investigate how they experience these possibilities precisely because they are in a situation where the characteristics of computer mediated communication are important.

1.3.3 HYPERTEXT/ HYPERMEDIA

Hypertext can be defined as text composed of blocks of words and images linked electronically by multiple paths and trails in an open-ended (and unfinished) text (Landow 1997: 3). Ted Nelson introduced the term in the 1960s as a non-linear text system, which cannot be printed conveniently on a conventional page (Nelson 1967: 191, 195).[9] The main functional difference between a hypertext and a linear text, is how the hypertextual structure enhances the possibilities for effective information retrieval as hypertext is continually dynamic and thus not inhibited by the ever evolving beliefs in what is true (ibid.). Hyper*media* has become a common concept as sound, animation and other types of visual information have been included. Still the concepts are often used interchangeably. In this inquiry hypertext refers to the very wide interpretation of "text" also including sound and images.

I do not intend to go deep into the specific characteristics of hypertext or the many philosophical discourses concerning the nature of hypertext in relation to critical theory or postmodern theses (Landow 1997). A fundamental overview of the hypertextual structure is important to understand its relation to the individual's control over the information retrieval process. I will not undertake a thorough analysis of hypertext documents. In this context it is important to keep in mind that hypertext displaces the authority of the producer, as the users are a decisive factor of how the documents are conceived and as the users are spurred on to choose their own experiences. Hypertext reorganises the relationships between producers and receivers of messages, which makes the individual actor much more decisive in the information retrieval process.

What makes the internet different from other media is exactly how its content is often hypertextually structured. David Kolb refers to Michael Joyce who operates with two types of hypertext differing on how much the text requires from the reader (Kolb 1996: 21). Most hypertexts are of an *exploratory kind*, presenting a given fixed structure of nodes and links. The reader can only choose what links and paths to follow but cannot add anything to the text itself. Contemporary web-browsers are developed for hypertext of this

[9] "Machines will present complex interconnected text units to users who will weave their way through them at a glowing screen. Successive user choices will evoke successive presentations (…)" (Nelson 1967: 191).

kind. It is easy to link your own document to an existing one, but it is not possible to introduce links in pages produced by other people (there is always the possibility of contacting the author and asking to be linked up). In contrast, c*onstructive hypertexts* are fully symmetrical: the text remains open to users adding links in both directions. In a more current essay, Michael Joyce separates between different generations of hypertext. In the first generation readers and writers of bounded (yet large) texts enjoy rich interactive environments (the constructive hypertext). With the development of the image-driven web, readers and writers take their place in almost unbounded texts, which can only offer sparse interactive environments (exploratory hypertext) (Michael Joyce 1999: 233-234).[10]

The pertinent hypertextual documents in a Burmese context are traditional web pages of an exploratory kind. The internet offers what seems to be an infinite amount of information, where the reader chooses which paths to follow. This is essential as it implies that the reader is free to choose her/his own centre of experience. Landow argues that "the reader is not locked into any kind of particular organization or hierarchy" (Landow 1997: 38). With the reader controlling the sequences of the blocks, it becomes clear that hypertextual web pages cannot be linear in the same way as books are. Rather the text is composed of fragments and reading units, which are more self-contained as they also need to function independently of the text-blocks they are linked to. This way the text is never final, and the reader is the decisive factor deciding the structure of the fragments. Again, what Nelson wrote over 30 years ago, becomes illustrative for the value of the hypertextually structured internet. As the reader searches for understanding he will continually discover new elements of interest, "often of growing relevance to his hunches, his confusion and his unphrased questions" (Nelson 1967: 196).

Several web-sites are quite linearly structured. An obvious example is that of texts that originally were made for traditional publishing, but which have been published on the internet without adapting them to the possibilities that the web offers. A text is instead presented in the same way as any text in books. This is effective when it comes to spreading information and making books and essays more accessible, but it is not a user-friendly way of presenting a text. Full-length books and essays tend to be printed out on paper and then read. Hypertext advocates seem to criticise using the internet to publish text in the traditional linear way on the internet. However this still is a very effective and thus

[10] Michael Joyce is first of all known for his hypertext fiction, and Landow considers him to part of a group of young writers together with Mark Amerika and Shelley Jackson, who all see disorientation as an aesthetic effect (Landow 1997: 119). A factual constructive hypertext might on the other hand be less fortunate.

valuable device to make information more easily accessible. Burmese are probably more interested in accessing relevant information, and not whether the documents they find useful have a good hypertextual structure. In any case, the different web-sites on the internet are fundamentally linked in a hypertextual manner as the different sites do include links to other relevant pages.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This thesis is based on a case study, and the structure of the thesis follows a linear-analytical composition, which is a standard approach to case studies of this kind (Yin 1994: 138). In this chapter I have presented the case and clarified some essential concepts. The next chapter is a background chapter on Burmese culture and society. In Chapter III I elaborate on the specific characteristics of the case study focusing on how the whole research process has to follow the same line of reasoning. In Chapter IV I explore different relevant theories, and I imply what sort of findings I can expect from my empirical data based on the theories I adopt. In the analysis of the empirical data in Chapter V and Chapter VI I present the findings from the interviews and from my research of Burmese web-resources, and the implications of these findings in relation to the theoretical perspectives from Chapter IV.

My intention in the next chapter is to briefly present Burmese history, demography, different cultures and the contemporary political system. Although my concern is Burmese people living outside Burma, it is important that their background and the Southeast Asian context may be understood.

Chapter II

BURMESE RELIGION, CULTURE, HISTORY, AND SOCIETY

THE AIM of this chapter is to sketch a background so as to understand views on the individual, its freedom and the society in Burma. Western ideas are not necessarily directly applicable to a Southeast Asian context. In the sensitive "Asian values" debate, the argument that personal freedom plays a lesser role in Asia is common, and values of liberation, freedom and rights are said to be of a more communal character. Such claims attack the idea of the universality of freedom and human rights.[11]

> "Asia" figures in the minds of many as a kind of Antarctica of freedom, a cultural zone where social order is the controlling value and where well-adjusted members of family-centred communities reject Western political institutions as harbingers of alienation and chaos (Kelly 1998: 4).

My ambition is to avoid the pitfalls of both the "Asian Value" debate and the views on the "universality" of Western values and perspectives. A thesis about Burmese living in exile or for some reason outside their own country needs to have a balanced grounding, treating the case from appropriate premises. Robert H. Taylor correctly argues that the issues of Burma have to be put into a comparative historical perspective, and effective political options do not follow when merely superimposing Western values on a country very different from the wealthy urban societies (Taylor 1998: 34). I will analyse Burmese history, culture and the unfortunate contemporary situation from a local perspective, but still with a focus on why it is not possible to explain the situation by referring to any specific Asian values.

[11] In March 1993 representatives from Asian states attended a meeting in Bangkok. The result of the conference was the "Bangkok Declaration of Asian States" where the leading spokespersons' concerns for the significance of the different national and regional particularities with regard to freedom and human rights were expressed. Kelly (1998) argues that the Declaration's mild terms might legitimise illiberal politics.

2.1 RELIGION

Understanding how Buddhism affects a society and its values is central in a Burmese context, as 89% of the Burmese are Buddhists. Of the remaining population, 4% are Christians, and 4% are Muslims (CIA, The World Factbook 1999 on Burma). For many centuries, the dominant influence for Buddhism in Burma has been *Theravada* (Pali: *thera* "elders" + *vada* "word, doctrine"), which is the name for the school of Buddhism that draws its scriptural inspiration from the Pali Canon. This is generally accepted to be the oldest record of Buddha's teachings.[12] In this section I examine what role, if any, the Theravada Buddhist legacy and its ideals have in shaping the contemporary political thought among Burmese.

In general, the Buddhist doctrine can be summarised by four truths: life is suffering; suffering is caused by desire; suffering and desire can be eliminated; living a virtuous life according to the eightfold path eliminates suffering. A virtuous life has to include right views, right thoughts, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation (Irwin 1996). In the Buddhist philosophy of Burma, the individual occupies the centre of life, in the sense of the doctrine of *karma*, or *kan*. *Kan* as literally "action" is a moral law of cause and effect. Every action produces consequences for the actor: good action produces good effects, bad action produces bad effects. The relationship of this doctrine to issues of personal freedom and the individual's free will, is complex, but in the end the individual has the choice regarding what to do and which path to follow. Ian Mabbett refers to Padmasiri de Silva who has examined the concept of equality in Theravada Buddhism. "[He] recognises in it 'the concept of human dignity and equal respect for all'; The Buddhist perspective on equality is basically oriented towards the human person as a free and rational moral agent" (Mabbett 1998: 25).

According to Josef Silverstein, Burma's religion and culture actually constitute one of the two sources of the idea of freedom in Burma:

> (…) the idea of freedom in Burma has two sources, one deeply embedded in Burma's religion and culture, the other imported from the West as part of the intellectual baggage of the British. By the beginning of the twentieth century the two streams had merged, and today the idea of freedom in Burma is a mixture of the two traditions (Silverstein 1998: 188).

[12] Bullitt at http://www.accesstoinsight.org/theravada.html [22-05-2000].

Theravada Buddhism teaches that all living creatures are caught in the wheel of rebirth, but human's ability to think for themselves, make them responsible for their own destiny. Only humans have the freedom to escape the wheel of rebirth through their karma and their ability to take action over their own lives. Humans must think for themselves and are solely responsible for their own destiny. Any bad action will have its consequence. Silverstein offers a rather positive view on the British colonial rule when claiming that the other source to the idea of freedom in contemporary Burma is the heritage from the British colonial rule.[13] Silverstein clarifies that political freedom is not this Western idea, alien to the Burmese society and with no roots in their culture, as the Burmese military leaders claim it is.

2.1.1 THERAVADA BUDDHISM AND ITS HISTORICAL RELATION TO THE SOCIETY AND POLITY

Buddhism originated in a world far from the Western modern life, with very different ontological assumptions. Buddhism is originally a non-political religion, and gives few guidelines for how to organise a society. Thus too far reaching modern political ideas about the individual and the society should not be read into the ancient writings, although the Buddhist perspective has without doubt been influencing the political thoughts among Burmese.

Both Josef Silverstein and Juliane Schober argue that in a traditional Theravada order, Buddhism is cosmological and focuses on the total constructs of religion, state and society (Silverstein 1998, Schober 1995). Burmese tradition incorporated the idea of a strong state under an absolute monarch, and the tradition of the all-powerful king had its roots in Buddhist thoughts:

> At least since the reign of Asoka, the complementary roles of world conquer and world renouncer have defined the conceptual structure of Buddhist kingdoms and of traditional South ad Southeast Asian galactic polities. The righteous king (*dhammarãraja)* – or even a more encompassing universal monarch *(cakkavatti)* – represents secular authority, while the religious authority of the Buddhist monkhood *(sangha)* is predicated in renunciation of worldly gains in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment and disciplined action to uphold the Buddha's teachings *(dhammai)* (Schober 1995: 310-311).

[13] Silverstein does not claim that the British came to Burma to teach the Burmese about freedom and liberty, but argues that these ideas entered Burma as a by-product of the British way of looking at politics and society. Especially important was the British concern about life here and now, and not so much about lives to come (Silverstein 1998: 191).

This cosmology of galactic polities was challenged by the influence of colonial powers. Schober argues that colonial influence caused a gradual laicization of Buddhism. The religious reforms continued in post-independent Burma and aimed to unite modern political ideology and the traditional Theravada Buddhism. After the military take-over in 1962, the *sangha* (the Buddhist clergy) suddenly lost power and were cut out from the political life. During the fourteen democratic years under U Nu, they had become used to being consulted by the government (Matthews 1999: 35). The military government in Burma later made further religious reforms, in centralising and taking control of the *sangha*, and thus promoting a kind of galactic polity in a modernised context (ibid. 316).[14] Burma's junta, which at the time called itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council, SLORC,[15] regained control over the *sangha* in the early 1980s. The *sangha* has played a central role in organising opposition to the regime, and when SLORC came to power they dealt with the opposing monks by banning all of the existing organisations of the *sangha* except nine apolitical "legal sects" (Alamgir 1997: 344). The state sponsored State Clergy Co-ordination Committee ("sangha maha nayaka committee" or SMNC) is the authority of the state recognised monastic orders (US State Department 1999). Buddhism is thus promoted, but, at the same time, strictly controlled.

Still, Jalal Alamgir argues that the power of the *sangha* (and the students) increased when Aung San Su Kyi claimed that democracy and human rights are compatible with Buddhism and Burmese traditions (Alamgir 1997: 343). This is in line with how Josef Silverstein (1998) comprehends Suu Kyi's idea of freedom in the mainstream of Burmese thought and therefore easily accepted by the people. The idea of freedom is rooted in the religion and traditions of the people (Silverstein 1998: 188). Suu Kyi also sees a connection between the Buddhist view on the individual and a suitable political system. The individual's ability to reason and to realise her/his potential requires a political system allowing the individual to develop and exercise her/his freedom. This is only possible in a democratic society. The tensions between the monks and the regime have continued in the 90s. The regime's interference with religious life makes it necessary to offer a short discussion on the degree of freedom of religion.

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[14] Bruce Matthews (1998) claims that the military regime has appealed to certain key-aspect of the pre-colonial dynasties. The authoritative governments belong to a kind of Burmese paradigm.

[15] SLORC is the former name of the military junta. They changed their name in 1997 and are currently adhering to the better-sounding name State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Exile political activists have shown little optimism regarding positive political changes by the SPDC (Matthews 1998: 7 note). Burma is still under the same strict military rule.

2.1.2 FREEDOM OF RELIGION?

At the same time as Theravada Buddhism is an influence on values and thoughts among the Burmese people, it is also the religion promoted by the military regime, although officially Burma has no state religion (US State Department 1999). The Government in Burma has continued to show preference for Theravada Buddhism, and it also controls activities and expressions of its clergy. The Government has increasingly made efforts to link itself to Buddhism as a way to increase its own popularity and possibly build up their preferred image of a united Burma. In order to do this, it seems it has been necessary to make life hard for different religious minorities. This is despite their claimed policy of promoting interfaith tolerance and mutual understanding among the practitioners of different religions.

> (…) the Government, apparently in order to promote national unity and bolster its legitimacy among the Buddhist majority, discriminated against members of minority religions and restricted the educational, proselytising, and building activities of minority religious groups (US State Department Section 1: 2).
>
> Despite the ostensible policy of promoting interfaith tolerance, reports from various sources alleged that government authorities fomented religious violence by Buddhists against Muslims and used force to promote Buddhism and discourage Christianity among some ethnic minorities (US State Department 1: 3).

The security forces make the worshipping of other gods than Buddha difficult by destroying churches and mosques, and by promising children a neutral education and then instead give them education to make them Buddhists (ibid. section 2: 3). Despite all reports on the violation of religious freedom in Burma, the government tries to build up their image as a caretaker when it comes to the many different ethnic groups and their religions:

> Myanmar is a country, which prides herself on the fact that all the major religions of the world flourish side by side in complete harmony and understanding. Successive Myanmar Governments had encouraged and supported various religions so that their adherence may profess their faiths peacefully and freely. Today, the present Myanmar Government is not only continuing the same policy but also in the process of promoting and cooperating with religions of all faiths in Myanmar (Myanmar official homepage, [29.05.00]).[16]

The U.S. Department report is congruent with Schober's arguments that SLORC uses its patronage of Buddhism to legitimate its authority and in international negotiations in Asia.

[16] The official Myanmar web-site is continually changed, and this specific document is not available anymore. See appendix V.

Schober also refers to conversions of minorities to Buddhism among Chin and Karen people (Schober 1995: 318).

2.2 HISTORY

The history of ancient Burma starts with the founding of the Pagan dynasty in AD 1044. Throughout the history of pre-colonial Burma, the country's political history consisted of a continual power struggle between the different city states in the central Burma, and between central Burma and the peripheral areas of the Arakanese, Mons and Shans (Maung 1998: 6). The situation escalated in the second half of the 18th Century, when the Burmese kings invaded the kingdoms of Arakanese, Mon, and Shan. After 1784, friction also developed between the Burma kingdom and British India, caused by a newly established frontier between Burma's Arakan province and British Chittagong (Cady 1960: 67).[17] The first Anglo-Burman war of several took place in 1824-1825. The warring state of Burma produced a fragmented social order, and in 1886 Burma became a country under British colonial rule. Burma obtained its independence after 62 years, in 1948, and the democratically elected government named their country the Union of Burma.

The union of Burma internalised the tradition of parliamentary democracy and bore little resemblance to the Burma of the pre-colonial past. The frontiers, home to diverse ethnic minorities, were to be incorporated in the new independent country. The Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) led by the young former student leader General Aung San, was the party responsible for the signing of the agreement for independence. Aung San and six cabinet members were assassinated in Rangoon in 1947, and Aung San's party fellow, U Nu, became the new leader of AFPFL. The next year he became the first and the only democratically elected Prime Minister. He faced a formidable quest of integrating a very fragmented country whose economy was devastated due to the battles in Burma in the Second World War.

The years following independence were problematic with political struggles between the different ethnic groups in Burma. Still, democracy survived until 1962, when the Burmese army led by General Ne Win overthrew U Nu's democratic government and seized power in Rangoon. Already in 1958 Ne Win had temporarily taken over power to restore order before the national elections in 1960. Ne Win and his Burma Socialist

[17] This chapter is in large parts grounded on Cady 1960 and Maung 1998.

Programme Party (BSPP) banned all political parties and organised Burma as a one-party state. In 1974 the country was put under a socialist program called *Burmese Way to Socialism,* and all enterprises were centralised and nationalised. As a result of this socialist/military mix, Burma's economy deteriorated drastically. By adopting their version of socialism, the regime stopped foreign trade. According to Jalal Alamgir, Burma's annual exports of rice in 1941 amounted to more than 3 million tons; the figure for 1993-94 was 263,000 tons (Alamgir 1997: 341).[18] In 1987 the United Nations declared Burma one of the least developed countries in the world (Alamgir 1997: 341, Smith 1991: 24).

In 1988 a massive democratic movement was initiated in Rangoon and spread throughout the country. The movement ended in tragedy as the Burmese Army, led by General Saw Maung, formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), took over from the BSPP, and violently suppressed the uprisings. They killed an estimated 10 000 students, monks and civilians, arrested even more, and caused many intellectuals to flee the country. Just after the formation of SLORC, Aung San Suu Kyi became the General Secretary of the newly formed National League for Democracy (NLD). NLD was to become the most important representative for the opposition, and in the multi-party elections held in May 1990, the NLD won 392 out of 485 seats in the Parliament. Unfortunately SLORC did not approve of the results, claiming that the time was not ripe for democracy in Burma.

In 1993 the junta convened a constitutional convention of handpicked, mostly SLORC-friendly delegates, with the mission to create a constitution. This supposedly constitutional process has been nothing but a manipulative SLORC/SPDC managed instrument, from which the NLD withdrew in 1995:

> Noted NLD member Win Htein, "It was useless to participate in this nonsensical process. Actually we didn't walk out of the convention. We were withdrawing for the time being because SLORC refused our request for consultation about the irregularities in the composition of the delegates. After two days they expelled us because according to the regulations, anyone absent for two days is to be expelled" (Matthews 1998: 11, note 9).

According to Aung San Suu Kyi, NLD had no option but to boycott the undemocratic convention and the unconstitutionality of the constitution (Maung 1998: 60). The boycott ultimately led to NLD being expelled from the convention. Mya Maung claims that the national convention was a calculated move by the junta to impede the democracy movement and establish military dictatorship over Burma.

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[18] Alamgir refers to Far East and Australasia 1996 (London: Europa Publications 1996), p. 644.

Due to the student dissidents, the universities in Burma have been sporadically closed since the uprising in 1988. The student opposition has been subjugated ever since, and many have been forced to flee to the frontiers or leave the country. According to Maung, more than 10 000 politically active students were forced to flee to the Thai border, where many joined the Democratic Alliance of Burma, a coalition of different ethnic minorities and dissidents from the Burma heartland. The closing down of universities is a serious threat to any future democratic Burma. Philippe Agret refers to a "lost generation" of students due to the lack of educational opportunities:

> While many student activists remain in prison or in exile, the result has been a decade of lost opportunities for all Myanmar's youth. The rare periods when universities have been open have been quickly interrupted by a return of repression - deserted campuses and months of inactivity during which only the most fortunate can continue studying with private tutors (Agret 2000).

Instead of opening the central universities on a permanent basis, the regime has created universities in new satellite towns, located far away from the centre of Rangoon. This has clearly been done in order to disperse the students, although the authorities deny that security reasons are motivation behind and claim it is being done due to lack of space in the city centres.

2.3 THE ETHNIC SITUATION

One of the military junta's main political objectives is to secure "Stability of State, community peace and tranquillity, prevalence of law and order; and National reconsolidating" (Maung 1998: 50-51). These are difficult objectives in a fragmented country as Burma, although the regime prefers to give an impression of the country as united.

Burma is inhabited by several ethnic groups and subgroups (44 ethnic subgroups among the Chin alone), and can generally be divided into the Burman majority and six ethnic minorities: Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Arakan[19] and Shan.[20] Over 100 languages are identified as being spoken in Burma (Smith 1991: 30). According to the 1999 CIA World Factbook, Burma's population is about 48 million. Statistics on population and the

[19] Buddhist Arakans are referred to Rakhine, while the Muslim Arakanese are sometimes referred to as Rohyngias (Martin Smith 1991: 30). I use the general term Arakanese as I do not have the intention of going deep into this matter.

[20] One of the male interviewees in this study is a Karen. The Karens in Burma are Christians. Otherwise the interviewees are Burman. In addition there is one who is Burman/Chan and another who is a Burman/Karen.

size of the different ethnic groups are not totally reliable, as they are based on estimates, and official Myanmar statistics tend to underestimate minority numbers. No matter what the regime wants the picture to look like, the diverse ethnic groups have continually caused insurgencies, and cultural and political independence have been claimed by minorities (Smith 1991: 31).

The ethnic past of Burma is very complex, and the recorded history began amongst the Mon, Burman, Arakanese and Shan valley kingdoms on the basis of city-states (ibid. 32).[21] Since independence the priority of the different rulers has been to establish the idea of a common identity. The scale of the ethnic differences has made the shared historical experiences of the different ethnic groups essential. This shared experience is especially directed against the imperialistic West with its materialistic values. General Saw Maung continued the same line of argument when he seized power in 1988, this time dropping all the references to socialism (ibid. 36). In spite of the glorious talk about national unity and the flourishing religions and ethnic minorities, the military junta most likely grossly exaggerates the community of language and culture.

Minorities have been hugely disadvantaged economically, educationally and politically (ibid. 38). Due to their situation, ethnic armed opposition groups have been in a continuous civil war against the ever-increasing military army. According to Josef Silverstein (1998), the relations between ethnic groups are very complex, and groups are still divided by ethnic lines. One united front against the ruling military army does not exist, although the alliance The National Democratic Front was established in 1976, and drew several minorities together with a common political programme on remaining part of the Union of Burma (Silverstein 1998: 139). After the uprising in 1988, refugees joined together with the minorities and formed the new organisation Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB). The formation of DAB served to form a more united front against the government, and Silverstein argues that it represented a new beginning in the military-minority relations. The politics of DAB is based on equality and respect for all participants, rejecting ideas only beneficial for one group (Silverstein 1998: 146). The military regime has, on the other side, continually presented the minorities as hostile and disloyal to the Union. They claim that the minorities remained loyal to the British during the Second

[21] The geography is much the reason for the patchwork pattern of the different ethnicities in Burma: "(…) the rugged horseshoe of mountains surrounding the central Irrawaddy valley has historically proven a formidable barrier, as much to rulers trying to unify Burma from within as to any invading armies. The result has been a constant meeting and intermingling of peoples across the centuries, which has led to a pattern of cultural exchange and adaptation of almost infinite kind" (Smith 1991: 31).

World War, or that they were ready to overthrow the legitimate government and a impose a communist regime instead (Silverstein 1997: 138).

Martin Smith argues that no real progress can be made before the various minorities in Burma are secured economic, social, political and cultural rights, and a chance to control their own destiny (Smith 1997: 119). A further ignoring of the minority problems and a continued "belief" in a united Burma by the military regime, will not solve any problems and will only serve to deteriorate the relationships between the ethnic groups. SLORC did succeed in a cease-fire process with important armed ethnic opposition groups in 1996, but fighting has continued in several areas, and the underlying ethnic problems of Burma are not solved solely with cease-fires (Smith 1997: 120). Mya Maung even argues that SLORC's claim of establishing "national peace and tranquillity" by entering these cease-fires is nothing but a façade, as it has not entailed any surrender of arms, an end to the civil war or a solution to questions concerning freedom of ethnic minority states (Maung 1998: 51).

The ethnic controversies in Burma are evidently significant and different ethnic groups seem to be very conscious their own culture and background. It would therefore have been interesting to include an ethnic perspective regarding online activity, as it is possible that ethnic lines in some degree guide communication and interest groups on the internet. The minorities have their own homepages in addition to the ones covering the whole of Burma. These sites inform the general public about issues concerning their specific cause and function as get-together spaces for the minorities.[22] I have nonetheless chosen to focus on Burmese in general to simplify my case.

2.4 CONTEMPORARY BURMA

In this section I will briefly examine Burma in the 21st century, with its state system, and its conditions for freedom of speech, assembly, and media and communication.

2.4.1 STATE SYSTEM

The present head of state in Burma is General Than Shwe, who replaced Saw Maung in 1992. As a Prime Minister, Than Shwe is both the chief of state and the head of government. He has a supreme command and an absolute loyalty of those beneath him. The remaining executive branch in Burma is the cabinet, consisting of the military junta

that calls itself State Peace and Development Council (former SLORC) (CIA-the World Factbook 1999 - Burma). SPDC controls and represents the legislature, executive and judiciary of Burma simultaneously (Maung 1998: 31).

The main function of SPDC, as in 1962, is to restore law and order and to uphold the unity and stability of state. In order to do this, Burma has several draconian laws and orders, established to impose tough discipline upon the people, and to make sure dissidents are crushed. The most frequently used law is the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act:

> In general, the act empowered the government to convict any Burmese citizen for political activities and confer a death sentence or life imprisonment of up to seven years for either infringing "upon the integrity, health, conduct and respect of state, military organizations, and government employees or spreading false news about the government" (Maung 1998: 28).

In addition, harsh laws exist that prohibit persons to spread mistrust in government, from writing and distributing uncontrolled news and literature or to undermine the morality of people in general.

In 1989 the military junta claimed martial law by which military tribunals were established. These tribunals were dissolved in 1991 but trials and persecution remain arbitrary due to the overall power of SPDC. Treatment in prisons, especially the feared Insein jail, is beyond any care for human rights, as physical and psychological torture and ill-treatment is common among political prisoners and criminals (Maung 1998: 31-36).

The most important change arriving with the SLORC/SPDC in 1988, has been their adoption of "the Burmese Way to Capitalism", a variant of the East Asian approach to economic development with an open-door capitalist market under the control of a strong state. This manoeuvre is generally explained with the special "Asian values" and by claiming that economic development must come before any kind of democracy. Asians supposedly attach more value to social order, family and social welfare. But as Maung argues:

> The insistence of authoritarian Asian leaders that the Western idea of democracy or good government as "the government of the people, by the people, and for the people" is alien to the Asian value system in general is a myth. (…) The claim of certain Asian leaders that Asians in general place family or social welfare over and above individual liberty and welfare ignores the fact that this exaggerated and distorted Chinese neo-Confucian value system is not universal among diverse Asian culture systems (Maung 1998: 18).

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[22] See for instance http://www.karen.org/; http://www.shan.org/; and http://www.shanland.org/ [22-05-2000].

Maung further refers to David I. Hitchcock, who claims, on the basis of empirical evidence, that the clash of cultural values between East and West has been overly exaggerated (ibid. 18). Traditional Confucianism does not favour pure economic growth, but harmony, love and magnanimity. It seems more likely that the Asian-value argument is nothing but a rhetoric device to justify leaders their "right" to set human rights aside and govern without support or consent from the people. The Burmese government is thus an authoritarian one, a system that does not allow regular institutionalised changes in government through free elections (Alamgir 1997: 334).

Alamgir argues that the structural sources for the authoritarian rule in Burma was put in place during Ne Win's socialistic Burma, meaning the social, cultural and economic arrangement for the society. This structural basis has been decisive in maintaining the military rule despite the national and international strategic challenges, which have been facing the rulers since 1988. The structural base of authoritarianism in Burma can be explained with a *nationalism thesis* in the sense that the junta seized power in order to promote national unity and order in the fragmented country. Ne Win justified his take-over, as the only way to prevent Burma from disintegrating.

The state system depends heavily on the military forces, the *tatmadaw,* to keep stability and order in place. Andrew Selth (1998) considers the armed forces as crucial in the struggle between the opposition working for democracy and the regime's continued governing:

> For, with its pervasive political influence and increased military strength, the tatmadaw is still the final arbiter of power in Burma. It not only underpins the SLORC's continued rule but actively prevents the pro-democracy movement from exercising the mandate it secured in the 1990 general elections (Selth 1998: 87).

Since the 1988 uprising, the military force and the military budget have probably doubled. Such numbers are insecure, but during a visit to Australia in early 1995, a SLORC spokesman admitted that the goal was a military machine of some 500 000, men and women in 2000 (ibid. 88). In addition, there have been considerable improvements in military equipment. Selth makes a point of the actual rationale for the Burmese army expansions. Before the modernisation the standard of the army was very low. Before 1988, the tatmadaw's weapons and military equipment did not stand comparison to its nearest neighbours. Despite these rationale explanations, Selth concludes that the rapid expansion

and modernisation seems to have been based on the fear of loosing power. The main objective is to prevent renewed civil unrest.

2.4.2 FREEDOM FROM SPEECH, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Since the military seized power in 1962, the government has controlled and monopolised all news media and telecommunications (Maung 1998: 25). The dominant daily newspaper has for over three decades been the state owned and operated *The Working People's Daily*, renamed to *The New Light of Myanmar* in 1994.

Freedom of association and expression are severely restricted by laws. Order No. 2/88 prohibits assemblies of more than five people. Those violating the order might be subject to imprisonment of up to five years. The same very strict laws control expressions and press. The 1962 Printers' and Publishers' Registration Law was renamed to Order 8/88 in 1988, banning any activity, literature or speeches aimed "at dividing the Defence Forces" (Maung 1998: 29). Further, all publications of legal organisations are censored and regulated by Order No. 3/89. This law is supposed to prevent material containing anything opposing the military government. Domestic and foreign publications are censored and controlled by The Press Security Board. Regulations are not restricted to written materials, as laws from 1993 and 1995 control telegraphy and video. Television and broadcasting are naturally strictly controlled by the state as well. The state suppresses all media, and communication is further inhibited by a very poor and fragile infrastructure.

Revisions of a 1996 computer law ban unauthorised possession of computers with internet facilities. In an article in *The Irish Times* (2000-02-07), Sandy Barron claims that the cost of having an unlicensed computer and modem is up to 15 years in jail. Web pages can only be created with state permission, and account holders are responsible that nobody else uses their account. Due to the enormous costs[23] and the severe restrictions ordinary people have no possibilities to access the internet or email. An article in *Myanmar Times*[24] gives the government version of the situation. The military junta tries to present a more optimistic picture, and stresses how they are working towards "a comprehensive internet access in Myanmar" (*Myanmar Times* 2001-02-05). Comprehensive, however, is a vague concept. According to the unknown writer of the article, it could be possible for sites

[23] "You want to get online? That will cost two years' average salary for the hook-up fee and a decade's wages for a year's dial-up subscription. The cost of having an unlicensed computer and modem is up to 15 years in jail" (Sandy Barron 2000).
[24] *Myanmar Times* is a weekly magazine controlled by the military junta.

appropriate for mass consumption to be made available, "while those deemed inappropriate by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) could be effectively blocked out" (bid). This total control of communication and media is an attempt to counter the demonstration effects from democratising processes in other countries.

Living in such a propaganda-dominated country clearly has its effects on those living there. The Burmese population has almost since its independence lived without being able to say what they believe. The massive propaganda also influences the population and how they think about things. Every day they are given the same stories about the goodness of the government and the dangerous Aung San Suu Kyi. I will continue this discussion in Chapter VI, but then from the respondents' point of view. 6.1 illustrates how those who have experienced the system perceive it and it also clarifies how and perhaps why the Burmese media might influence people in Burma.

Despite the strict regulation of media and communication, the Burmese traditions valuing debate and the free exchange of ideas remain important at least among the educated elite. Peter Carey (1996) argues that much of the spirit in Burma is sustained by literature and the exchange of ideas through talks and discussions, or in the tradition of "Gathering for a Talk". This tradition, originally developed during the Japanese occupation in the 1940s, has taken on a new meaning under the military censorship. The participants are careful not to take up too sensitive subjects due to the military surveillance of all communication.

To conclude this chapter it might be interesting to take a look at the official views from the military government. Their main strategy to explain why the time is not ripe for democracy in Burma is to emphasise that political change cannot take place before basic human rights like security, food and shelter are assured. In this respect they do not hesitate to call Burma a third world country or find it necessary to explain why Burma's economy and development have been deteriorating since the military take-over in 1962. Rather, they seem to present basic development and democracy as conflicting:

> The demand for the freedom to exercise full political rights will come when Myanmar reaches a more mature stage where the unity of the 135 ethnic groups living together in the country becomes stronger and when the fundamental needs of the population have been fulfilled to a much higher level. It is unrealistic for other nations to force Myanmar to be on a par with them in giving their citizens political rights when Myanmar must and should be at her very stage of development prioritising national unity, peace, stability and developing her economy with an aim of creating a strong middle class (Political Situation Of Myanmar and its role in the region: 23).

The government prefers to give an impression of their good intentions, and of planning to reach something equivalent to a democracy, but based on their own "Asian" premises. They like to present an image of a stable and united Burma, in opposition to the destructive international forces threatening a peaceful country:

> Anti-government organizations from abroad are out to incite commotion and riots inside the country by hook or by crook with every intention of disrupting the internal stability and peace and tranquillity of Myanmar (*New Light of Myanmar* 26-05-2000).

There are large discrepancies between what the military junta says and how Western media and pro-democracy activists present the Burmese political and social situation. Albeit both sides may exaggerate, there is little doubt that the protective government has a few things to hide from the scrutinising eyes of investigating journalists. In this chapter I have tried to describe the situation in Burma and to develop a fundament that can be helpful in the following pages to understand the Burmese context.

Chapter III

METHODS

THE NATURE of a research project is always the decisive factor when deciding on what method to use. Robert K. Yin (1994) argues that the relevant situation for a case study strategy is when the form of the research question is *how and why*, when the study does not require control over behavioural events (as in experiments) and when the study focuses on contemporary events (Yin 1994: 6). The empirical base for this study is semistructured interviews with twelve Burmese of different ethnic backgrounds. I have also observed the activity in some Burmese sites, but these observations are not of a systematic character. This research has still been a significant part of the study, as the different sites are studied as *documents,* which play an important role in case studies.

With Terje Rasmussen's words, the thesis can be understood as a study of technology-mediated action in an everyday context (Rasmussen 1996: 89). Rasmussen claims that the analysis of communication-technological mediation should focus on four different domains: analysing the content requires an analysis of text and discourse, analysing the agency/context call for case studies or experiments, studying the social systems and the power relations of the technology calls for institutional, historical analysis of political economy, and lastly, it is necessary to explore communication patterns through mapping patterns of flow. This can rarely be done in one singular study. My approach focuses on the agency/context aspect of communication technology, and more specifically, on the reception and appropriation of communication technologies (Rasmussen 1996: 84-90), but without in-depth ethnographic methods. I follow Rasmussen as he argues that the use of technology no longer merely takes place in contexts; they now also create contexts. These computer mediated, and somewhat created, contexts are the focus of the analysis. This does not mean, however, that the computer mediated contexts can be seen independent of the surroundings within which they take place.

3.1 THE CASE STUDY

> (…) case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study, like the experiment, does not represent a "sample", and the investigator's goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytical generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization) (Yin 1994: 10).

Robert K. Yin's point is that the explanatory case study is supposed to answer the *how and why* questions of the contemporary phenomenon being studied (questions like *who, how many or what* are not relevant). This inquiry opens up with very descriptive research questions, asking how the Burmese value the internet. Still these overriding questions will give tentative answers to why the Burmese use the net. The inquiry is thus of an exploratory kind but with some explanatory aspirations. Doing a case study is not about finding an empirical sample that accounts for a whole population. Further the case study researcher deliberately wants to get the whole picture, believing that the real-life context might be of great importance. These possible contextual conditions cannot be accounted for by a multiple-choice survey, and as such, the study relies on multiple sources of evidence, prior development of theoretical propositions and openness towards new and unexpected aspects (Yin 1994: 13).

Doing a case study is not about quantitative versus qualitative methods:

> the case-study strategy should not be confused with "qualitative research" (...) Some qualitative research follows ethnographic methods and seeks to satisfy two conditions: (a) the use of close-up, detailed observation of the natural world by the investigator and (b) the attempt to avoid prior commitment to any theoretical model (ibid. 14).

This quotation might be confusing, as case studies often are thought of as necessarily qualitative research. Terje Rasmussen argues that ethnographic methods are necessary to grasp how technology is being used in their contexts (Rasmussen 1996: 86-87). The researcher has to dig deeply into the agents' use of technology either using ethnographic case studies or social experiments. Conversely, Yin argues that case studies need neither be ethnographic nor qualitative and certainly not both. Due to limited time and resources, my chances to do a close-up, detailed observation of the natural world are minimal. Neither do I avoid using theoretical models. In designing the project, developing theoretical propositions guided me when collecting the data, as they illuminated what sort of information I wanted from my respondents. In the analysis the "previously developed theory is used as a template with which to compare the empirical evidence of the case

study" (Yin 1994: 31). In Chapter V and VI I compare the empirical data in relation to what I expected to find as a result of the theory I use in Chapter IV.

Although case studies do not have to be qualitative, this case study certainly is. As will be apparent the interviews are qualitative and semistructured, and quantitative methods are not a part of the analysis. Still I do not totally avoid using concepts like "most of the respondents" in the analysis in Chapter V and VI. This is however not to imply any generalisations to a population of Burmese, but rather to give a picture of the situation among the interviewees.

3.2 THE INTERVIEWS

According to H. Russell Bernard semistructured interviewing is suitable in situations where the researcher only has one chance to interview the respondents (Bernard 1995: 209). Semistructured interviews are based on an interview guide, which is a written list of questions and topics that need to be covered in a particular order. In this study, the respondents were interviewed for a short period of time (never for more than an hour), and the interviews were made following the same interview guide. The respondents answer the open questions with their own words. The aim is to interpret their opinions and insights and to acquire their subjective meanings and narratives. The interviews are qualitative but not ethnographic. Ethnographic interviews are often unstructured and used in long-term fieldwork when the researcher has lots of time and can interview people on many separate occasions (Bernard 1995: 209).

Quantitative methods are used to collect data with the purpose of analysing the material statistically, and the surveys are done in order to generalise from the sample to the population. As I have already explained, statistical generalisations are not the purpose of this thesis.

> The purpose of the qualitative scientific interview is to collect descriptions of the lifeworld of the interviewee, aiming at interpretations of the meaning embedded in the phenomenon (Kvale 1997: 41. My translation).

Focused qualitative interviews are characterised by being controlled by the interviewer, and the discourse between the participants is thus asymmetrical. This makes the interviews somewhat structured, which is important to secure a scientific research and to succeed in

gathering systematic descriptions of the respondent's life-world (Kvale 1997).[25] The purpose is to analyse the empirical material according to approaches and questions in the thesis and thus to improve on potential hypotheses and theoretical models.

Interviews are well suited for capturing the essence and the complexity of phenomena. Giving the respondents a chance to talk more openly and to make a full line of argument extends chances of obtaining a more comprehensive picture of the multiplicity and ambiguity of views among the interviewed (Kvale 1997). Open qualitative interviews are characterised by aiming at understanding the meaning of phenomena in relation to the life-world of the interviewee. They are descriptive, they are focused on the theme, and, at the same time, the interviewer aspires to be flexible and to be able to follow ambiguities and changes (Lantz 1993: 34). Thus, although the interviews follow the same guide, I did adapt the questions to the respondents I was interviewing. The same questions obviously did not have the same relevance for all of the interviewees. These adjustments were done during the interview as I learned more about the respondents.

The interview guide is relatively specific with a firm structure from which I deviated when necessary. The guide kept me on track and prevented me from losing sight of the main purposes of the interview. Sometimes getting back on track was a little inelegant and cumbersome as the conversations took rather steep turns. In the last interview I talked to a respondent very concerned with the significance of Buddhism for Burmese people. Turning from religious devout matters to the significance of the internet felt pretty clumsy, but was a very necessary step to get on with the interview.

3.2.1 THE RESPONDENTS

I have chosen to use the term interviewees and respondents and not informants, as the latter seems to imply that those who are interviewed have a more central function in the case study, such as suggesting sources of corroboratory evidence. An informant is usually someone the researcher has come to know over a period of time, whereas respondents are chosen more randomly and whom the researcher is unlikely to see again (Bernard 1995: 210). Finding respondents turned out to be more work than I first imagined. My aim was to only interview those who have access to the internet, as I suspected that interviewing both those with and without access would easily result in a thesis on general media-patterns. I soon understood that I did not have the possibility to choose the respondents carefully,

[25] The interviews are still not structured and based on a predetermined questionnaire.

considering variables like age, occupation or ethnicity. The twelve respondents still illuminate different important aspects. I promised my respondents that I would treat their interviews anonymously. I will thus only give information about their occupation, age and gender.

In June 2000 I contacted *Democratic Voice of Burma* (DVB)[26] to carry out a couple of test-interviews. I interviewed a female web-editor and a male technician, both 30 years old, to see how my questions and my interview guide worked out. These interviews were important in the process of learning what kind of questions I should ask and *how* I should ask them. The first interviews were also essential and important to become more familiar with Burmese and their culture. As it turned out, these interviews were good enough to be analysed together with the rest of the interviews. The interview guide does not differ considerably for the test-interviews and the main part of interviews, which were accomplished in November 2000. Using the test-interviews in the analysis does therefore not represent a significant problem, as both of these interviews illuminate important aspects of the approach. I interviewed a 36-year-old male reporter at DVB in Oslo in late October 2000, but making interview-arrangements was difficult, as there are not a lot of Burmese in Norway. When one of my contacts, Ph.D. candidate in social anthropology, Per Lundberg, could help me with getting in touch with Burmese in London, I decided this would be more efficient than continuing the search for respondents in Norway. Nine interviews are thus with Burmese living in London. Among these there were three male students and three female students aged 22 to 29, a 42-year-old monk, a 37-year-old male political activist, and a 53-year-old male doctor. Appendix III presents an overview of all respondents.

The respondents differ considerably when it comes to how experienced they are with the internet. I have interviewed Burmese who work professionally with the internet and novices with little experience. What influence these different backgrounds have on my respondents' expectations might be an interesting aspect worth paying attention to. It would seem likely that experienced and professional net-users offer more optimistic interpretations of the significance of the internet, as they have the necessary knowledge of using it efficiently. Six respondents work with the net professionally or are very experienced with using it due to their political activity. The other respondents are students

[26] *Democratic Voice of Burma* is a radio-station located in Oslo. They have daily broadcast to Burma (short wave). The programs are then put on the internet. See http://www.communique.no/dvb/ [15-05-2000]

and well educated. This evidently has consequences for what sort of answers the analysis presents.

I got in touch with the Burmese respondents through asking various acquaintances whether they knew of anyone that could be interesting to interview. Through two independent sources I received the name and phone-number to various people in London. I had no problems with making appointments as nobody turned down my request. Another less fortunate strategy was to ask the many Burmese I have met online.[27] The idea was to conduct some interviews online using a messenger-application. This was not very successful, the most obvious reason being that they did not know anything about me and I did not know anything about them. These are certainly not the best conditions to start talking about sensitive matters online, as people are afraid of conversations being traced. In addition, fictive roles can easily be played online. The importance of doing interviews in a face-to-face situation should also be emphasised. Semistructured interviews are best accomplished when the researcher and the respondent are having a direct conversation. According to Bernard personal interviews can be much longer, as respondents rarely devote much time to answer questions comprehensively without the researcher probing for more details (Bernard 1995: 258-259).

3.3 SECURING QUALITY

Judging the quality of empirical social research can be done according to four concepts: *construct validity, internal validity, external validity* and *reliability* (Yin 1994: 32). Internal validity only applies to explanatory case studies. The investigator tries to determine whether event x led to event y and to think of any other factor, which might have contributed to y. As mentioned in 3.1 this study is more of an exploratory kind than an explanatory because the main purpose is to examine how the respondents use the internet. As there are some explanatory aspects in this thesis, I still try to consider rival possibilities and to closely examine that the results are based on the right premises and secure that different arguments follow from each other. Claiming that the respondents maintain their Burmese background because they use the internet, would weaken the internal validity, as I would have to look at other reasons for these patterns.

[27] I attended several Burmese online clubs, and as a result I daily get invitations to private conversations with Burmese people.

Construct validity

Construct validity is about establishing correct operational measures for the concepts being studied. In one sense I am analysing the internet in relation to freedom of information and communication. I do not have any chance of measuring these concepts without looking for how these concepts can be operationally defined. Without a prior specification of what I am actually looking for, there is no guarantee that the evidence is not purely based on my own impressions and the data will not be comparable. I have chosen to explore how the respondents value the possibilities to use the internet, and I ask them specific questions about their use to illuminate the case (see Appendix IV: *Interview guide)*. This inquiry is more exploratory than explanatory and measuring variables and comparing the data is not a major goal. It is still useful to be conscious of how the approaches can be illuminated and measured.

Three other tactics increase the construct validity of a research project. Using multiple sources of evidence or *triangulation* encourages convergent lines of inquiry. In surveying the same concept is used to describe when one point in a landscape is looked at from two other points. In a case study the approach is studied from two other points to see how the evidence converge. Thus two methods are used to study the same approach. I use both interviews and documents when collecting data. The observations of online activity are extensive albeit unstructured. Findings and conclusions are likely to be more convincing and accurate when based on different sources. The multiple sources of evidence provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon. Establishing and maintaining a *chain of evidence* is another tactic to increase the construct validity. This allows an external observer to follow the derivation of the evidence from initial research to the ultimate conclusions (Yin 1994: 98). The steps should be traceable in any direction, citations to the specific documents and interviews should be sufficient, and data should be available when required. The third tactic is to have any key informant review the draft report. Any comments from those who have been interviewed may be very helpful.

External validity

I have already explained how generalising from the sample to the universe is not the goal when doing a case study. I cannot infer from my results to all the exile-Burmese around the world or exile-groups in general. As mentioned earlier case studies rely on analytical generalisations. “In analytical generalizations, the investigator is striving to generalize a

particular set of results to some broader theory" (Yin 1994: 36). If the same results were found in similar case studies, the results might be accepted as more general if not universal. Robert K. Yin calls this *replication* by which a theory is tested through replications of the findings in other similar cases. This study of Burmese and the internet can be seen in relation to other research projects on the communication, information and community aspects of the internet. I had some ideas of how the picture would be like, and based on common evidence in other studies, I expected certain results.

Reliability

Using documentation of operations of the study, any investigator should ideally be able to repeat the study with the same results. According to Yin, following the same procedures as used and described in the study should lead to the same findings and conclusions. Bernard explains the concept as "whether or not you get the same answers by using an instrument to measure something more than once" (Bernard 1995: 38). In this way, errors and biases in a study are minimised, and the reliability of the study increases.[28] Making it possible to do the same case over again means that the procedures have to be documented. Every step of the research process and all calculations must be capable of being audited. A high level of reliability requires that the researcher handles the data with care, securing accuracy and a trustworthy representation of the case (Østbye et al. 1997).

Securing reliability implies being very conscious whether the data really illustrates what they are supposed to illustrate. A well functioning interview guide is therefore of major importance. The interview guide in this case worked rather well and contained questions the respondents understood and could answer comprehensively, and which highlighted the approach of the thesis. Although the two test-interviews were good enough to be used in the analysis, the interview guide at the time still had some awkward questions, which were easily misunderstood or not understood at all. I was interested in exploring whether distance has any significance for the computer mediated communication. Judging from the response I received, I would indicate that distance is not important. The first respondents did not even seem to understand why I was asking the question. Rather than asking whether distance is important, I should have asked with

[28] Østbye et al. (1997) emphasises that requiring intersubjectivity and reproducible results are more important in quantitative methods. Using qualitative methods implies that the researcher has to depend much more on herself and her interpretations in order to get anything out of the interviews (Østbye et al. 1997: 103).

whom they communicate and where they live. This would have given me a far better indication of the significance or insignificance of distance.

I was a little concerned that the interviewees answered how they assumed they were supposed to answer. It was therefore important to give a very neutral impression. The intro of the interview guide indicates that the internet may be of specific value for dispersed communities, and was thus skipped (see Appendix IV). The questions are mostly of a descriptive character in that the interviewees tell how they perceive different aspects of the internet. Overall, I believe the interviews are reliable and representative for the respondents' true opinions.

3.4 DOCUMENTS

Documents are written or audio-visual productions not produced by the researcher (Syvertsen 1998: 5). There are different kinds of documents such as annual reports, press releases, letters, news-broadcasts and handouts. The different web-sites and online communities can also be seen as documents. I have done extensive research on what exists as Burma-related material. This research has been very important for corroborating evidence from the interviews and other sources. The collected data are understood in relation to these documents. I have only studied public documents, but they have been both of institutional and private character.[29] In this process,

> [the] researcher has to be conscious about the purposes and audiences the documents are written for. By constantly trying to identify these conditions, you are less likely to be misled by documentary evidence and more likely to be correctly critical interpreting the contents of such evidence (Yin 1994: 82).

Documents are not produced by the researcher, which means there are no dangers that the researcher has influenced the results (Syvertsen 1998). The documents are created without having an observer looking over the shoulder, studying the activity and asking questions. The material is thus reliable as "genuine". Still documents must be carefully used, and they should not be accepted as recordings of events (Yin 1994: 81). The documents reflect the (unknown) bias of the author or authors. The authors of online documents are often much more anonymous and knowing their purposes and motives is difficult. Other documents, such as those produced by organisations and institutions, are very specific about their

[29] Online documents are often both private and public simultaneously. Private home pages are perhaps the most obvious example.

political background. It is important to keep the bias of the authors in mind and to be critical towards how one interprets the documents. No documents are neutral or from an unbiased point of view.

Online material has been very important as background material before doing the interviews as knowing the Burmese community is necessary to do this kind of research and studying what exists online is a prerequisite to learn how these networks function.

One problem with online documents in relation to the paper-versions (or tapes, video-films) is their rather unstable character. Stability and the possibility to review the documents repeatedly is one main advantage with documents, but this is not always true for online documents, which, on the contrary, are characterised by being dynamic and ever-changing. I therefore include the date when referring to different web-sites.

3.4.1 EVALUATING SOURCES

The possibility for everyone to publicise material and opinions on the internet makes it more important to examine the sources critically and to decide their authenticity and reliability (Syvertsen 1998: 11). A number of questions can be asked to determine whether the source is of high information quality. Wolfgang Memorial Library (WML) publicises a very helpful list on their page *Evaluating Web Resources*.[30] The documents I use, rarely intend to be objective. Nevertheless it is important to see who are the sources, and to be very conscious about whose opinions are publicised. I use both official pages of the military regime in Burma[31] and several anti-government pages. The point of using these different resources is not primarily to contribute with factual information, but rather to examine the ideas and opinions of the organisations and individuals. I have used internet-resources of both *informational, news-oriented*, *personal and advocacy* kinds (WML). I have focused on different aspects to decide their quality and reliability. The most general is whether it is clear who is responsible for the content. The question is not necessarily what is true and what is not, but that it comes clear whose view on the world is presented (Syvertsen 1998: 15, WLM). The documents are important for learning how organisations and individuals want to be represented. Pages and resources, which do not give any kind of information about postal address or phone-numbers, cannot be assumed to be reliable. Being critical is about reflecting on what function the document has in its natural context

[30] http://www2.widener.edu/Wolfgram-Memorial-Library/webevaluation/webeval.htm [05-09-2000]
[31] http://www.myanmar.com [05-09-2000]

and whom it tries to reach out to. The content should also be free of grammatical, spelling and typographic errors, at least if presented as an official site. One major problem is the amount of outdated material on the net. Therefore information on when the page was written and placed on the net should be stated. Continually revised pages and current material increases the level of reliability (Syvertsen 1998: 12-13, WLM).

3.5 ANALYSING THE DATA

The analysis requires knowledge about Burmese culture and values and about the social aspects of new media and the internet. My prior comprehension of the internet made me eager to explore the possible community-building role of using the internet. The main problem about conducting the research and analysing and interpreting the empirical data is the fact that I am not Burmese and I do not know Burmese culture in a real sense. It has several times felt very awkward to study people who have a very different background without any specific knowledge about Burma, the Burmese or their culture. Still I did not have substantial problems analysing the interviews or understanding the respondents, although I do not think I have fully understood the extent and significance of Buddhism. The religious aspect might therefore be understated. The feeling of being a naive Western student trying to understand the Burmese did diminish as I conducted the interviews. Nevertheless, the fact that my knowledge about Burmese culture is quite restricted has to be underlined. H. Russell Bernard emphasises that participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork give the researcher an intuitive understanding of what is going on in a culture, which makes her/him able to formulate sensible questions often in the native language (Bernard 1995). This is evidently not the case in this inquiry.

But being on the outside may also increase the possibility of having sufficient distance to the object of study and of being able to analyse the material more objectively. Bernard stresses how this may be a problem for researchers who study their own culture. It is harder to recognise specific cultural patterns and the researcher is likely to take a lot of things for granted (Bernard 1995: 154). Thus the fact that I am not a perfectly culturally qualified researcher is in part compensated for by my possibility to keep a distance to what I am studying.

3.5.1 THE STRATEGY

Analysing case study evidence is about examining, categorising, tabulating, and recombining the evidence *to address the initial propositions of the study* (Yin 1994: 102). The aim is to analyse the data in relation to the approach trying to improve rather than to prove or disprove anything. This does not mean that I have exclusively been searching for evidence supporting my prior knowledge and expectations. Equally important as continually referring back to the initial propositions, is to follow new and unexpected patterns and alternative explanations and views. "The ultimate goal is to treat the evidence fairly, to produce compelling analytical conclusions, and to rule out alternative interpretations" (Yin 1994: 103). Thus besides analysing evidence in corroboration with my approach, I have to implicitly or explicitly explain why I have interpreted the evidence as I have, and why the alternative interpretations are not as good as the ones suggested. This is however the ideal and it poses a very demanding challenge. I have not fully succeeded in considering alternative interpretations, but I have been conscious and very critical towards my own interpretations.

According to Yin, my strategy for the analysis was to follow the theoretical propositions that led to the case study. I had an idea that the internet must be a useful device for minority groups and people in exile. The theoretical propositions shaped the data collection plan and also made me aware of how I would analyse the empirical material. My proposition helped me focus attention on certain data and to ignore other data. The analysis is based on a *pattern-matching logic* (Yin 1994: 106) as I compare the empirically based patterns with predicted ones. I summarise the theory-chapter by deriving some patterns, which follow from the perspectives I have treated in the chapter. Clearly I have had to take several evaluations concerning what theories are appropriate in the context of the inquiry. As a researcher I assume and expect certain patterns, but these assumptions are evidently not my own subject meaning but based on different theoretical models.

The social and the political aspects of using the internet are separated both in theory-chapter and in the analysis. Chapter V thus concerns social aspects of the analysis, whereas Chapter VI concerns political aspects. The structure of the analysis in part follows the interview guide, but the answers to the questions are in the analysis structured according to the predicted patterns derived in the theory-chapter.

Chapter IV

THE INTERNET AS A SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY

4.1 DEVELOPING A THEORETICAL BASIS

IN CHAPTER one I explained how understanding context is significant for grasping what communication is about. I argued that communication should be qualitatively understood, and that there are no clear distinctions between senders, receivers and messages. This is even more the case with computer mediated communication (CMC), where all participants are often free to contribute in producing messages. I have already treated the subject of computer mediated communication and hypertext, and the foundation for communication and communities these structural features create. I open this chapter with an elaboration on the significance of technology. A thorough discussion of the technological question is important to understand the use and the potential significance of the internet for the Burmese. The chapter treats several theoretical perspectives concerning social relationships, the specific conditions for network communities, democratic communication and democratisation, and the possibilities for public and political discourses. Critics would claim that this is a far too eclectic approach. On the contrary, I claim that different perspectives have to be discussed to understand how the internet functions in the social lives of the Burmese. One single theoretical perspective would not contribute to a comprehensive picture of the situation. My aim is to use theories that together suggest indications of the political, social and cultural aspects of my approach. The following two quotations indicate the importance of using different perspectives:

> In order to understand the new media, sociology and other social sciences need to reassess concepts and theories in relation to the new patterns of interaction, their rearrangements of time and space etc (Rasmussen 1996: 27).

> No longer approachable through the uniform visions of singular disciplines, this complex of technological and social interdependencies requires a multidisciplinary perspective. Such a perspective, grounded in the study of politics, economics, and sociology of information and communication technologies, is developed in the pages that follow (Mansell and Silverstone 1996: 1).

As these quotations show, the complexity of new media necessitates an approach with several foundations. Terje Rasmussen explores *mediation* from the perspectives of media theory, structuration theory and critical theory. Robin Mansell and Roger Silverstone develop "a "middle-range" theory of innovation, integrating social, political, and economic perspectives on the dynamics of technical and institutional change (ibid. 6). My challenge was to find the theories, books and essays that would give comprehensive and exhaustive answers to my approach. I did not feel that one single theoretical approach could provide answers that considered all the necessary conditions. Perspectives from political philosophy, social community theories and communication theory constitute the theoretical grounding of the thesis, as they all contribute in explaining important aspects regarding the political, social and cultural meaning the internet might have. The chapter will clarify what I expect from the empirical material. In 4.4 I summarise these expectations and illustrate how they influence the analysis in Chapter V and VI.

4.1.1 THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TECHNOLOGY

Investigating the role of technology is central in a thesis concerned with what Terje Rasmussen calls technology-mediated action. Media technologies mediate and reproduce the lifeworld in different ways and thus provide new forms of social interaction (Rasmussen 1996: 100). These new modes of social interaction are the focus of this thesis, and I assume that the internet facilitates new possibilities for communication and information retrieval for the Burmese. In order to pursue such claims, the relations between technology and social agency need to be outlined. The aim is to illustrate how communication technologies play an important role in reproducing and maintaining identity through mediating meaning and knowledge between individuals (ibid. 138). A technological discussion is thus not irrelevant when it comes to the Burmese and their use of the internet. I will try to explain how one must not loose sight of the technical aspects of the discourse while at the same time stressing the social and cultural side.

Defining the term technology (as with defining communication and democracy) is essential. Discussing different meanings of technology is one way of comprehending the debate about new technologies. These definitions in large part influence the way the social significance of technology is understood. James B. McOmber (1999) explores why technological discourse tends to isolate technology from the societal circumstances of its

origin in spite of many studies claiming the opposite.[32] Although he recommends a definition of technology that draws attention to the ways technology bear a cultural context, other definitions are not wholly wrong.

> (…) technology, being only a word, can have no timeless essence that transcends any of the uses to which it is put (Wittgenstein 1958). Like any other term of such public significance, technology is a repository of overlapping, inconsistent meanings. Some of its uses are quite broad; others are quite narrow. Some are laden with cultural values; others are relatively neutral (McOmber 1999: 149).

The reader should thus be aware that the definition and comprehension of technology used in this thesis is a necessary limitation of an elusive concept.

Discussions concerning the role of technology and its possible impact on social change often departures from the antagonism between what is called technological determinism and instrumentalism. Catharina Nes describes the conflict very well (1999: 48-52). Technological determinism implies that technology has an independent effect on the society. Social change is the effect of technological development. Conversely an instrumental perspective emphasises that individuals proceed from their own free will or choice. Technology and its products are neutral and passive and might be used or misused, and it is the individual actors who decide how the technology is used.[33] Nes claims that both perspectives are clearly inadequate to explain the complex relationships between technology and the society. Terje Rasmussen (1996) focuses on how it is necessary to avoid seeing technology as either neutral tools or total systems of technique. This is a more comprehensive perspective.

"Technical elements as resources 'become' technology only through social use and interpretation, that is, in its blending with rules" (Rasmussen 1996: 170). Rasmussen argues that understanding and developing technology is a result of *using* technology according to conventions and routines. The rules and resources are the closely connected mental and material aspects of technology, and the effects of communicative practices and

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[32] Andrew Feenberg (1996) is also concerned with how much of the technology discourse operates with this separation. He refers to Habermas and Heidegger and how both of them, albeit differently, "offer insight only into the 'primary instrumentalization' of the technical object by which a function is separated from the continuum of everyday life" (Feenberg 1996: http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/feenberg/kyoto.html) [06-12-2000]. Although the primary instrumentalization is important, it is not exhaustive to the meaning of technique. The technical systems are embedded in a wider social and natural context, which Habermas and Heidegger ignore.

[33] This view can be illustrated with the slogan from NRA (National Rifle Association): "Guns don't kill people. People kill people." The slogan is supposed to illustrate that how technology is used is the most important aspect. Andrew Shapiro wisely criticises NRA and argues that like all technologies, guns are

the contextual properties of these practices. Resources are the same as Andrew Feenberg refers to as the "technical elements" inherent in technology. Feenberg's mission is to find a third approach of interpreting technology and the society and how technology and social forces influence and legitimate each other (Rasmussen 1995: 121). He succeeds in a persuasive way. For Feenberg, technology cannot be reduced to the modern belief in instrumentality, rationality and efficiency. He operates with three principle points. First, technological design is socially relative. Second, biased social influence over technological design contributes to social injustice. Finally, Feenberg argues that in some instances public involvement in the design of a device impacts on its development (Feenberg 1994: 2). These points underlie a theory of democratic technical change. The democratising function of technology is, on the other hand, only a possibility, as technology is fundamentally both constructive and ambivalent and can be used both in a helpful and a destructive way. But Feenberg is far from an instrumentalist. How technology is used is in large part decided by a technical code, which typically legitimises the political hegemony. In the modern Western world this code is about achieving efficiency and instrumentality. Feenberg manages to explain the third approach to technology by splitting technology into *technical elements* and *individual technologies*. The technical elements are the neutral basic technics. These elements are combined into technologies in the process where technology is constituted socially from the technical code. According to Feenberg the bias of technology is thus not only a consequence of the decontextualization and reductionism of technical objects. The bias includes a complex social dimension, as the technical objects are resolved in accordance with the social level and reflect the hegemonic values and beliefs that prevail in the design process (Feenberg 1996). Feenberg does not claim that the technical code is the only factor defining the social context of the technology, as some of the technical elements cannot be defined socially.

Computer technology is according to Feenberg more social than technical, and it has a liberating potential due to its open nature (Rasmussen 1995: 123). Because of the modern focus on efficiency and instrumentality, the communicative and mediating aspects of the computer have been ignored. Political and commercial forces have suppressed the democratic potentials inherent in the computer technology. Computer technology can either be used to maintain existing hierarchies or to undermine these hegemonic structures through the communicative capacities of the individual (ibid. 124).

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deliberate human creations embedded with values (Shapiro 1999: 13). The slogan is an example of what

Feenberg is not the only one who has focused on the social aspects of the computer and the internet. Lee Sproull and Samer Faraj (1996) conceive the internet as a social technology providing people not only with information but also with affiliation, support and affirmation. Their discussion is somewhat tangential of a discourse about technological and social change, but their views illustrate why it is important to focus on the social side of computer technology. An information-centred view will not capture the social benefits of online communication. "The human need for affiliation is at least as strong as the need for information" (Sproull and Faraj 1996: 79). Understanding the social character of computer technology is just as important as understanding the information side of it and as such this aspect belongs to a discussion about the nature of technology. For the Burmese who utilise the new spaces for social interaction that the internet creates, the social role of it might be significant. I choose to follow Feenberg's belief in the open-structured computer technology, providing individuals with new possibilities to intervene in how the technology should be used and developed. This has clearly been the case with the internet: the users have in large part influenced the further development of it. Feenberg calls this *re-appropriation,* meaning how technologies are modified through innovative applications.[34]

My main argument is thus that there are certain inherent features in the computer- and internet technology, which the Burmese can use to their advantage. What potential the internet entails is not self-evident, but is a result both of this inherent nature of the technology, and of how people use this technology.

4.2 THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

I analytically distinguish the social and the political level in the theoretical exploration of the relationships between using the internet and potential social, cultural and political consequences. I will first discuss the social aspects whereas the more political questions, including those concerning a public sphere, will be a separate part. This is a risky differentiation, as the levels are intertwined in a complex way.[35] I have separated the two aspects in different sections, as I believe this will give the discussion a tidier course. There

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Shapiro calls "the myth of neutral technology".

[34] Andrew Feenberg mentions Minitel in France and how "the Minitel was transformed when users hacked the system and introduced new communication applications that had not been planned by the designers (Feenberg 1994: 6).

[35] David Lyon is of the opinion that any separation of private and public spheres is totally inappropriate, today more than ever, due to how information technology enables a further blurring of the boundaries between the different spheres (Lyon in Rasmussen 1996: 366).

are so many theories on media, communication, the self, communities and public spheres, that a broad categorisation on an analytical level might make the picture less confusing. The reader should keep in mind that these separated categories are not independent, and that they might be looked upon as one. Still, as the analysis will illustrate, the political aspects are not that important for all, whereas for politically active, distinguishing between the social and the political is more difficult. Section 4.2 elaborates on the social, cultural and community aspects, while section 4.3 explores the possible political significance of the internet.

4.2.1 COMMUNICATING CULTURE

Network technologies have the potential of integrating people who live geographically dispersed. Using and contributing in these networks may have consequences for the individual's self-identity, as being part of online communities may be compared to being part of physical communities. The reader should be aware that I avoid using concepts like "virtual reality" versus "reality". The concepts seem to infer that online is less real than offline.[36] Instead of using the term virtual, I prefer to describe activity in the computer mediated sense as online. Online communication is not a cheap copy of communication in the "real world", or even trying to replicate the real.[37] Computer mediated communication has, like telephone conversations, become an integrated part of our lives, extending our possibilities to keep in touch independent of time and space. In fact, communication technologies might be closer to "reality" than any other mass media, because they mediate social action. Mass media present a filtered version of life (in some secondary mode), whereas communication technologies can be said to capture a reality in its creating (Rasmussen 1996: 262). Meaningful communication with others (whether face-to-face or dialogically mediated) opens up a common referential and space of intersubjectivity. This makes it interesting to explore the role of computer mediated communication among the Burmese. Telecommunication is less dependent on cultural values in society and more on the immediate communicative interaction between the participating individuals (Rasmussen 1996: 127). Thus the communicative interaction might create foundations for communities online.

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[36] Originally *virtual* was used in computer jargon to refer to situations that were near substitutes. Virtual memory implies the use of a section of a hard disc to act as something else and virtual reality suggests multiple forms of reality (Mark Poster 1995: 30). Today however, the term has almost no meaning, and I believe a discussion on the social aspects of the internet is better off without the concept.

My aim is in part to see how Burmese value the internet and whether it has any social function. The analysis below will thus explore the possible online communities among the Burmese based on their cultural values. There are several studies of the social impacts of the internet. One of the more comprehensive treatments of the subject is by James Slevin (2000), who aims at explaining the impact of the internet on modern life. He argues that when studying how the internet makes possible new forms of action and interaction, of using and articulating information, then the object of the study is how the internet is involved in *cultural transmission* (Slevin 2000: 55). Slevin tries to change the focus from solely studying what is going on online to the social contexts within which information and content is produced and within which communication takes place. Building on John B. Thompson's theories, he claims that to understand culture one has to consider it as meaningful symbolic forms, but to interpret the symbolic patterns one has to take the social relations and contexts of the culture in consideration (Slevin 2000: 59-61). Focusing on the specific socially and historically structured contexts and processes means giving attention to a more structural concept of culture. Meaningful actions, objects and expressions have to be seen in relation to the historically specific and socially structured contexts, as any symbolic form is produced, transmitted and received within these social structures (ibid. 61). Using Slevin's arguments as a fundament, the emphasis on contexts can be used to illuminate the connections that exists between online and offline. Slevin argues that the internet plays a crucial role in the process of cultural transmission as a mediator of modern culture expanding the ways media traditionally have contributed in the process of circulating information and symbolic content in socially structured contexts (ibid. 62). The way the internet stores and reproduces information, and the way it grants users to participate explain the social significance of the internet as a mediator of culture. Slevin conceptualises the internet as a modality of cultural transmission, but within a social context. The possibilities offered by the internet might thus be of considerable importance for maintaining a sense of identity and for affirmation among the Burmese.[38] These possibilities must however be seen in relation to the social context within which the

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[37] For a discussion of different comprehensions of how virtual relates to real see Crang et al. (1999).

[38] As I mentioned in Chapter II, there are seven major ethnic groups in Burma. There might be a considerable latent conflict between the groups, but a potential ethnic upsurge is not a theme in this thesis. The major adversary is probably the military government. Claiming that people unite in the struggle against a mutual enemy is not controversial. The same thing can be seen with the Zapatistas in Mexico where ethnic identity once divided the communities. In the fight against the authorities these differences were downplayed (Castells 1997: 78).

mediation of culture takes place. Whatever my conclusions are, I assume that the Burmese culture, values and religion are the fundamental elements that potential online communities are built upon. I will therefore emphasise that the internet is not likely to be the *crucial* element for maintaining a sense of community and identity. Burmese who do not use the internet are not destined to forget their roots, as the fundamental aspect is the already existing culture, values and norms. The internet is solely a device that might bring the familiar culture and community closer.

Focusing on context means I do not see online social interaction as an isolated phenomenon. Rather, online activity has to be seen in relation to other aspects of the interviewees' lives:

> The Net is only one of many ways in which the same people may interact. It is not a separate reality. People bring to their online interactions such baggage as their gender, stage in life cycle, cultural milieu, socioeconomic status, and offline connections with other (Wellman and Gulia 1998: 170).

Most people do not go online to socialise and communicate with others who by accident are there as well. Rather their offline context influences what they want from the internet and with whom they communicate.

Contextualization is a key aspect for Terje Rasmussen in his investigation of the relationships between media technologies, social interaction and forms of social action.[39] He argues that communication technologies set off different contexts for communication than other media (Rasmussen 1996: 231). Communication is thus not decontextualised but rather recontextualised.

> (…) communication technologies "do something" to communication, qualitatively different from processes of talk and mass communication. With the introduction of communication technologies in everyday contexts, contexts as well as communication change (Rasmussen 1996: 235).

Rasmussen explains context as the intermediary stage between individual agency and social systems where agents interact with each other, and which are experienced as meaningful by the agents (whereas systems consist of a plurality of regulated and connected contexts). There is a duality at play between the practises and rules of contexts as agents who act according to existing rules construct them. In this duality, the agents reproduce rules and resources for action. Social interaction and communication are one of

the most important features for the reproduction of contexts, and technology-mediated interaction overlaps with direct communication and becomes intertwined with the direct linguistic practises (Rasmussen 1996: 237). The point is that computer mediated communication does not annihilate direct, linguistic day-to-day practices (Rasmussen 1997: 64) as one sometimes is made to believe. This is an essential argument to keep in mind. Burmese who communicate online do not necessarily communicate less offline. Potential online communities may this be extensions of offline relationships and communities.

Both Slevin and Rasmussen refer to John B. Thompson and what he calls the "symbolic reproduction of social context" (Rasmussen 1996: 239). Individuals taking part in communication- and information-processes are involved in a process of constituting and reconstituting meaning. This process is part of the symbolic reproduction of social contexts (Thompson 1990: 153). But, as Slevin and Rasmussen emphasise, as mass media settle a break between producers and receivers, communication technologies imply a bi-directional process between the participants. Thus in contrast to mass media, response is often constitutive of the interaction, as the agent must respond for the communication to continue and must do so in an appropriate way. Using communication technology thus implies more involvement compared to using mass media. The degree of involvement further has significance for the contextualisation ability of the technology. "(…) communication technology link together individuals and groups that have an interest in communicating or sharing information" (Rasmussen 1996: 246). Communication technology mediates between people who are involved with each other's lives and is totally dependent on the participants and their context. The actual use of the technology determines its content and nature. Thus, in this case, the Burmese and their online communities are a result of their activity and how they have created and recreated the different contexts. Using computer mediated communication mediates culture among the participants and can thus be expected to be a significant contributor in creating and maintaining communities.

[39] "With 'contextualisation', I refer to the mediation of context – the ways communication technologies take part in the construction and reproduction of contexts of symbolic action" (Rasmussen 1997: 63).

4.2.2 THE NETWORK COMMUNITY

Summarising material from Chapter I, the complex concept of community connotes a great variety of meanings. This makes it a highly elusive concept, but the concept is in this treatise used to describe social networks and associations based on some common traits or characteristics.

Slevin explains the difficulty of communities in a modern society by discussing among others the imagined community of Benedict Anderson. Despite the heterogeneous nature of modern society: modern communication technologies (not exclusively the internet) open up opportunities for new forms of human association (Slevin 2000: 96).[40] To illustrate his point Slevin expands Giddens' thoughts about modernity and applies them to the internet:

> The possibilities of virtual reality are boosting to the extreme the dynamism of modern everyday life by heightening the process which Giddens describes as tearing 'space away from place by fostering relations between "absent" others'; 'the severing of time from space', he continues 'provides a basis for their recombination in relation to social activity…This phenomenon serves to open up manifold possibilities of change by breaking free from the restraints of local habits and practises' (Slevin 2000: 96-97 quotes Anthony Giddens 1990).

These modern associations must be measured and evaluated in terms of the participants shared experiences in their social and historical context. The term *network* in itself illustrates this point, as it can be said to distinguish out a group of individuals among a social whole by the social relations between the individuals (Rasmussen 1997: 72). Wellman and Gulia argue that in modern sociology there has been a conceptual revolution moving the definition of community in terms of space – neighbourhoods – to defining it in terms of social networks (Wellman and Gulia 1998: 169). This can further be seen in relation to James Carey's ritual understanding of communication. "Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (Carey 1989: 23). Communication is culture and constitutive for communities, which, according to Carey, makes it so difficult to fully comprehend the significance of communication for human existence.

The critical issue in Ananda Mitra's article "Virtual Commonality: Looking for India on the Internet" is the communality and fellowship that Carey's view on communication implies.

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[40] Slevin is very careful with using the concept "community" and rather uses "networks" or "associations". The final chapter will discuss the concept of community further.

> Indeed, what produces community in the era of Internet are the shared systems of culture, language, and beliefs that are spread across large distances and consequently the opportunities for community formation *vis-à-vis* the internet have broadened in scope and possibilities (Mitra 1997: 57).

Mitra refers to professional Asian immigrants in the West who live spatially distanced from each other. Alternative means of community formation thus becomes vital, and electronic communication systems are one of the many ways in which such relations are being formed (Mitra 1997: 57-58). Mitra argues that with the growth of computer mediated communication, new possibilities for community formations have emerged. This study of Burmese using the internet evidently shares the same point of departure. In section 1.3.1 I referred to Kollock and Smith, who argue that computer networks support many-to-many interactions. Computer mediated communication might thus have a function beyond traditional communication media. The modern comprehension of network might theoretically thus very well be maintained in part through computer mediated communication.

Symptomatic of studies on "virtual communities" in the last decade has been their focus on the personal freedom to be whoever you want to be. "When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass" (Turkle 1997: 177). Or as Howard Rheingold puts it: "Similar to the way previous media dissolved social boundaries related to time and space, the latest computer mediated communications media seem to dissolve boundaries of identity as well" (Rheingold 1993).[41] As the number and diversity of internet users have expanded, exploring how people might play with their identities in MUDs is less interesting. CMC is much more than playing fantasy-games with your many multiple personas. The internet and CMC present an interesting opportunity for people with diverging cultural values or identities (whether ethnic, sexual or political).

Does the internet facilitate electronic pathways with the same important function as physical roads, namely to connect people and give them a better chance of keeping together? I pursue a belief that network communities often are expansions of existing communities, and I view the internet as an instrument making it achievable to extend the reach of communities and as facilitating opportunities to reassemble information and to extend communicative actions. Many online communities are thus likely closely connected

[41] http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/ [10-04-2000]

to already existing communities. Online communities extend social networks and provide social support, companionship and sense of belonging. However, it is not a question of belonging to one single social network because:

> People do get all kinds of support from community members but they have to turn to different ones for different kinds of help. This means that people must maintain differentiated portfolios of ties to obtain a wide variety of resources (Wellman and Gulia 1998: 171).

The interviewees are probably not only part of a Burmese community and might belong to other social networks as well. Some of them are students, which means they probably maintain some academic relations. Likewise, other interests might be crucial for which networks they feel that they are a part of. Still, Burmese who use the internet possibly do so in part to seek companionship, and a sense of belonging to a Burmese community. As Wellman and Gulia argue, these online associations are characterised by reciprocity and a certain degree of attachment even as many of the exchanges that take place are between persons who have never met face-to-face (ibid. 177). The difficulties start when solely looking upon these communities as computer mediated. Some relationships might indeed be sustained online, but other communication devices like the telephone are probably important as well. Wellman and Gulia have a point when arguing that online communication does in fact play the same role as the telephone or even letters in Jane Austin's time. They are all "a reasonable way to maintain strong and weak ties between people who are not in a position to have a face-to-face encounter at that moment (ibid. 182).

With regard to the Burmese, computer mediated communication is likely central for people who already know each other. This is not always the case, and honest and deep relationships do seem to develop between people who have never met. The point is that it is essential not to lose sight of the context and the relationship between offline and online. Some scholars even see opportunities for face-to-face interaction as an essential component for online communities to work. Andrew Shapiro argues that the history of online communities suggests that people want to convene with their geographical neighbours both online and off (Shapiro 1999: 212).[42] I think this is congruent with the thought that the internet might have an essential role in maintaining already existing communities. It is thus quite possible that the internet might be important for the

community of the Burmese and connecting them despite huge geographical distances and different time zones.

The idea of online communities has met significant critique. Bruce Bimber (1998)[43] mentions Michael Sandel, who argues that no amount of technological interaction can be sufficient to constitute community. Joel Snyder (1996) bluntly argues: "The Internet is singularly singular. It came from a world of anti-social people, people who often could not relate to others in person" (Snyder 1996)[44]. His main point seems to be that real communities can not develop from such anti-social and infertile soil. Such perspectives are not sufficiently contextual and see online activity as isolated phenomena. This is what I want to avoid, and which makes it possible to see the online activity of the Burmese as constitutive for communities. Belonging to different communities is essential for the individual's sense of identity. A major part of the net is about increasing interpersonal communication, which at all times have supported and maintained social relationships and communities.

4.2.3 MEDIATING IDENTITY

Manuel Castells' understanding of identity might illustrate how online communities contribute in developing and maintaining identity:

> I understand by identity the process by which a social actor recognizes itself and constructs meaning primarily on the basis of a given cultural attribute or a set of attributes, to the exclusion of a broader reference to other social structures. (…) social relationships are defined *vis-à-vis* the others on the basis of those cultural attributes that specify identity (Castells 1996: 22).

This excluding mode of defining identity thus relies on being part of a community. Castells (1997) gives a further specification of what he means by the processes of identity. Identities, he argues, involves processes of self-construction and individuation, and are sources for meaning for the actors themselves. He defines meaning as the symbolic identification by a social actor of the purpose of her/his actions. In what he calls *the network society,* meaning is organised around a primary identity, which frames the others, and which is self-sustaining across time and space (Castells 1997: 7). Burmese might

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[42] This has indeed been the case with the telephone. In a research project by Wellman and Gulia in Canada, they found that the Torontonians they had interviewed spoke more with people who lived nearby than with those far away (Wellman and Gulia 1998: 179).
[43] http://www.polsci.ucsb.edu/faculty/bimber/research/transformation.html [13-02-2000]
[44] http://www.opus1.com/www/jms/iw-feb96.html [28-03-2001]

deploy the internet as a means to be part of Burmese communities and thus contribute in a reflexive self-formation process vis-à-vis non-Burmese people.

In any modern state, building a common identity has been an important political goal to preserve and strengthen national community. This can also be seen in multi-ethnic countries. For instance, the authorities in Burma struggle to create an illusion of unity, harmony and a common all-Burmese identity.[45] In the annual report from Reporters san frontiers (RSF) on conditions for media and communication, the term *myanmarification* is used to describe how the government uses the media to vaunt the virtues of a return to "the single original culture" and to reject westernisation and ethnic diversity.[46] In a post-industrial society characterised by global communication patterns, geographical boundaries are said to be less important. Burmese who live outside Burma have the possibility to take part in online Burmese communities, to read endless pages of news about Burma every day and to communicate with numerous Burmese online. Taking part in online communities can therefore be important for maintaining a Burmese identity or, in Castells' words, recognising yourself on the basis of some given cultural attributes.

Anthony Giddens' ideas concerning modernity and the self provide a basis for claiming that computer mediated communication and online information retrieval influence the self-identity of the individual. Giddens is not concerned with the internet specifically, but I believe his ideas are suitable in this context. He argues that:

> Besides its institutional reflexivity, modern social life is characterised by profound processes of the reorganisation of time and space, coupled to the expansion of disembedding mechanisms – mechanisms which prise social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide time-space distances (Giddens 1999: 2).

Reorganisation of time and space, disembedding mechanisms and reflexivity are the three main influences on the dynamism of modernity. These mechanisms are probably relevant for the Burmese respondents as well, and modern communication technologies might further increase the processes. Giddens argues that this is the case for all individuals in a modern society. The internet might have a potential significance in this process. Reflexivity, according to Giddens, refers to the vulnerability of most aspects of social activity to chronic revision in the light of new information and knowledge (Giddens 1999:

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[45] Building a national identity has been an important mission for democratic as well as for authoritative countries. Stein Rokkan (1987) has written thoroughly about what he calls *nation building*, on how important it has been for Norway to create a sense of unity.
[46] http://www.rsf.fr/uk/rap2000/asie/burma.html [10-10-2000].

20). This is why I argue that the internet might be of considerable importance, as the information and communication processes it facilitates are important in these processes. I sustain this argument despite Castells' comments to Giddens. Castells argues that with the rise of the network society, which Castells claims is developing from the high modernity, reflexive life-planning becomes impossible. This is because the network society is based on systemic disjunction between the locale and the global (Castells 1997: 11). Contrary, I underline Giddens' emphasis on a continuing flow of new information and knowledge, which actually undermines the security of knowledge (Giddens 1999: 21) and which give rise to a reflexive self-identity.

The reorganisation of time and space is not a consequence of the internet but is characteristic for the media of the modern era. Since the first experience of writing, the mediation of information and communication and thus of experiences has influenced both self-identity and the basic organisation of social relations. The internet can thus be said to make these processes even more efficient and the individual more independent of the immediate geographical surroundings. According to Giddens this is a phenomenon characterising modernity. "Globalisation concerns the intersection of presence and absence, the interlacing of social events and social relations 'at distance' with local contextualities" (ibid. 21). This connecting of local and global is arguably more important for people who live far from their home countries and familiar culture.

The internet is another device in the mediation of experience. Giddens claims that almost all human experience is mediated, either through spoken language, newspapers, television or other media (Giddens 1999: 23). He does not differentiate between the different characteristics of various types of mediated experience. Interpersonal communication is very different from mass mediated stories of happenings in distant places in the world. In any case, the mediating of experiences caused by the internet is both of a personal and a public nature, and both modes have a significant influence on the self-identity of the individual.[47] With the internet the Burmese have a valuable device for information and communication processes which they would otherwise not have. This may be extended to imply that these opportunities have significance for the Burmese self-identity. I will not go any further into the extensive matters concerning the formation of the self. In this context it is sufficient to say that the mediating of experiences in different ways contribute in this process.

[47] I get briefly back to public and interpersonal mediation in 4.3.2.

4.3 THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL

During the 1990s the communication infrastructure for democracy activists improved greatly. In an article in International Herald Tribune in October 1999, Thomas Crampton interviewed Burmese refugee and student activist Sonny Mahinder, who emphasises that establishing effective communication for co-operation among the activists on the Thai-Burma border was of major importance during and after the uprisings in 1988. As these possibilities were not very good in 1988, the situation is considerably better today. Although delivering messages by foot remains of crucial significance, FM wavelength walkie-talkies and short-wave radios soon became important in the jungle warfare. However Crampton claims that the greatest technological breakthrough for the dissident groups has been the internet, which is used in the political action to distribute news about Burma and to raise a world-wide awareness about the situation.

In an article in Wired magazine from 1996, Lin A Neumann interviewed Strider, the man behind the information-heavy mailing list BurmaNet. The article sums up in part what political significance the internet has, and which I want to explore in this thesis.

> These "countrynets" unite activists separated by tens of thousands of miles and allow instant access to a common pool of narrowcast news and information on nations and issues that are largely ignored by the mass media. (…) More than information, however, these nets and a growing number of webpages are helping knit together diverse communities united around a given issue (Neumann 1996).

BurmaNet has an effective network of correspondents working on the Thai-Burma border, but equally important is the collecting of articles and reports published in papers and delivering these to the subscribers of the list.[48] It is one of the best (in terms of most extensive) sources of information regarding Burma. An information pool of this kind is crucial for any social movement, and good information resources are also part of the struggle to mobilise public opinion against the military leaders in Burma. The point here is that information, knowledge, and effective communication devices are crucial in the fight for a democratic development in Burma. Both of the articles clearly illustrate views that confirm such claims.

[48] Subscribing to BurmaNet is free, but the emails are largely meant for a specialist community, particularly interested in what is going on in Burma. The daily emails are extensive and detailed. The daily newsletters are also posted on http://www.burmanet.org/ [29-03-2001]. The daily emails are also available in Burmese and with Burmese fonts.

W. Lance Bennett's ideas concerning the role of the media in processes of democratisation might illustrate the potential of the internet in the struggle for democracy. Connections between the media and democratisation should not be exaggerated, but that such connections exist are a prerequisite for making it interesting to explore how the Burmese use the internet. Bennett (1998) claims that democratic revolutions are fuelled by the continuing flow of political impressions. The media play a central role in creating small openings for reforms. According to Bennett, the media have two functions in the process of democratisation. The media have a witness role and inform both the rulers and the ruled about small changes in power-relations. The whole world can potentially be witnesses to the process. Another role is the reifying/confirming role, as the power of resistance movements depends on external confirmations on their own values. The last point can be further clarified by referring to Andrew Shapiro who argues, "Unfettered speech can shape and transform individual's expectations, giving them a new sense of the possible" (Shapiro 1999: 65). Combined these two functions might contribute to "a symbolic process that involves communication that constructs a historic moment in which the will and moral virtue of the people are perceived to surpass that of the rulers" (Bennett 1998: 200). Based on these ideas I will not argue that the internet necessarily contributes to a democratic change the same way as Bennett argues that the media have done in the Eastern European countries. His ideas are, however, interesting as potential consequences of Burmese online activity.

In this section I will defend these claims by referring to theories about the significance of information and knowledge for societies, especially emphasising the role of the internet. I will first clarify what comprehension of democracy creates the foundation for the thesis, before I explain what role if any, the internet might have in possible public spheres. It might seem to be marginal to the focus of the thesis to clarify relevant conceptions of democracy. This is however essential since the relation between the internet and democratic communication only follow from certain premises inherent in the democracy models used. I end the chapter with further describing what consequence computer mediated communication and the internet might have for people's individual sense of control and freedom of speech.

4.3.1 THE CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

There are a number of different normative theories and models of democracy. Placing the thesis within this extensive theoretical structure is necessary because the different

democratic models imply different understandings of information and communication and their role and function in a society. Our modern democratic ideals are rooted in the struggle and protest against the totalitarian and oppressive state. The weapon against suppressive state systems has traditionally been increased information and knowledge, which could be said to comprise the vital backbone of the enlightenment project in the modern Western world (Enebakk et al. 1999). The parallels to the situation in Burma, or any other despotic state are clear-cut and illustrate why the concept of democracy has to be elaborated to understand any possible function the internet might have in the struggle for democracy.

In the introductory chapter I argued that information and communication should be qualitatively understood as a process where meaning is created through a dialogue between participants (Enebakk et al. 1999). A qualitative understanding of communication focuses on the formation of meaning, and can be related to the participatory and the plural democracy model.[49] These models are grounded on the idea that human beings live in social communities, and individual freedom is seen in relation to the community of everybody.

The main point in the participatory model is to secure a functional public sphere, where ideally every citizen should have the right to express her/his views and meanings, and where discussions can take place. Every citizen should have a direct political influence like in the ancient Greek city-state. New media-focused optimistic proponents of the participatory model see the internet as a device to secure this kind of direct democracy where citizens have the chance of taking part in decisions. According to Enebakk et al. this is what is characteristic for the participatory democracy model, which makes it easy to condemn the model as very naive. Ingunn Hagen (1992) rather focuses on the participation aspect and does not pay that much attention to citizens having direct political influence. She argues that the classical theorists of the participatory model, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill, assert that the attainment of democracy is only possible through participation in the many spheres of society. Citizens need to take part in all spheres of the society to learn how democracy works. For Rousseau participation had such an essential part as it is necessary for the General Will, a concept inferring that somewhere

[49] Enebakk et al. (1999) discusses five different democratic models in relation to the use of information and communication technology as democratizing technologies. In the context of this thesis, I do not see it as necessary to treat all of the models. I deliberately limit the field to be concerned mainly with the models focusing on the communicative aspects. Neither do I see these five models as the best presentation. Charles Ess (1996) for instance distinguishes between three forms of democracy: the plebiscite, the communitarian and the pluralist democracy.

deep down people know what is moral, virtuous, valuable, and good (Altschull 1990). People need education and knowledge to see what the General Will is about. Hagen mentions mass communications as one arena where citizens can be expected to increase their knowledge about the society. Information and communication technologies can be said to work in a similar manner.

The plural democracy model shares some common traits with the participatory model, but focuses more on how a population can be divided into different groups according to interests. Enebakk et al. argue that these groups work in a socialising way where meaning and opinion is created. Individual actors take part in several different groups, and through being part of these organisations and communities, citizens raise their level of awareness and political competence. Likewise Charles Ess (1996) argues that the principle of pluralism is about free competition between groups representing specific interests. The advantage of the pluralist model is arguably that it provides minority groups the chance to organise and oppose to unacceptable policies. Information and communication technologies are believed to strengthen the different communities internally and independent of space and time.

Whether following a participatory or a plural model, the main focus should be on how communication and information is all about creating an understanding of meaning and content. Enebakk et al. are right when they argue that loads of information is not sufficient. Users of modern communication technology more than ever need to develop a communicative competence in order to take part in the political processes and to understand where to look and what to believe. Education, information and communication are central to achieve this kind of technological communicative literacy.

Both the participatory and the plural democracy model imply a democratisation of communication where information goes both ways. Freedom of expression and secured access should assure a great pluralism in content and opinions. Groups and social movements need access to the media as part of their strategies for social change. Janet Wasco (1992) raise important questions in this context. Do new information technologies enhance democratic communication, and how are these communication resources enhancing or inhibiting democratic progressive movements devoted to social change? Although I have no goal of answering these questions, I will indicate some relations

between what using new communication technologies means and whether these new technologies can be said to be of a more democratic nature.

4.3.2 A NETWORK PUBLIC

Many scholars consider computer mediated communication as a more democratic mode of communication than others for it presents potentials for the exchange of views and the elaboration of arguments and opinion is free and not as suppressed by external factors. Some see it as facilitating a direct or participatory democracy, where citizens can express their opinions. These (overly) optimistic views on the democratic potential of the internet have been met with other perspectives claiming for instance that the loads of information are totally unstructured, not reliable, anonymous, and require highly literate users.

Charles Ess (1996) argues that sustaining a belief in the democratic potential of computer mediated communication for social groups requires a theoretical framework that establishes a clear definition of democracy and defends it against charges of utopianism and ideology (Ess 1996: 201). I have already clarified what definitions of democracy are essential in this thesis, stressing the participatory and the pluralist model. My point of departure is an optimistic belief that computer mediated communication makes a difference for those using it and possibly democratises communication. The aim is to develop whether, why and how this is so. According to Tanja Storsul (1999), the democratic potentials of the internet are a result of the new possibilities for information retrieval and communication that are created. These new possibilities are, as should be clear by now, the focus of this thesis. Storsul argues that there are three main reasons, which differentiate the internet from other media. Firstly, the internet is not inhibited by geographical boundaries. This makes the internet especially important for people whose freedom of speech is constrained by national authorities. Secondly, it is much easier and less expensive to publicise information on the internet than in other media. This is another reason that should be relevant for smaller networks of people who cannot afford traditional means of spreading information. Thirdly, Storsul points to how the internet has made an enormous amount of information available. The possibilities for finding alternative information sources have thus grown considerably. Based on these arguments Storsul argues that the internet can strengthen freedom of speech, and thus the individual's possibilities to participate in an active democracy (Storsul 1999: 144). The democratic potential is however only a potential unless everyone are secured access to necessary

infrastructure, unless people develop a communicative competence for using the technology, and unless there is a plurality of voices on the net.

Although these requirements are not fulfilled today or for Burmese in general, it is still interesting to explore the democratic potential of the internet in relation to Burmese people. Similar situations in other countries suggest that the internet may contribute in processes of social change. Tedjabayu Basuki (1999) illustrates how the net became an important device in toppling Indonesia's former president Suharto. Indonesian activists and students were able to receive online news about events that were not fully reported in the regulated mainstream media (Basuki 1999: 103). Furthermore, hard copies of online material were distributed down to the grassroots. Similarly to Basuki's essay, other studies about the internet and its democratic potentials for social movements and groups working for social change have focused on information dispersal and retrieval on the net. Oliver Froehling (1999) argues that one of the most important functions of the net for EZLN (*Ejército Zapatista de la Liberación Nacional*, or Zapatistas) in Mexico has been to reach out to an international support network. However, Froehling argues that, "there is no evidence for a direct presentation of the EZLN on the web (…)" (Froehling 1999: 171). Supporters of EZLN outside Mexico used the web to co-ordinate actions, disperse information and EZLN communiqués. Froehling's point is that the information on the net did not emanate from a central site in Mexico, but from multiple sites in contact with each other throughout the world.[50] The possibilities the net opens up for greater international support and hence pressure on authoritative or undemocratic governments should be emphasised also in the case of the Burmese situation.

All forms of mediated communication contribute to a sphere in which knowledge is shared and opinion is formed. Based on what Enebakk et al. write about the plural democracy-model, an online public sphere cannot be characterised as one big and united arena, but rather different groups of people where every single one contributes in the constitution of various contexts (Enebakk et al. 1999: 106). Citizens increase their political awareness through participating in a number of communities, and the internet likely makes it easier to take part in communities less dependent on geographical borders and time differences. Ingunn Hagen (1992) argues in a similar way that a concept of democratic communication

[50] Harry Cleaver emphasises the problem of access for the Zapatistas in Chiapas. "Zapatista messages have to be hand-carried through the lines of the military encirclement and uploaded by others to the networks of solidarity" (Cleaver 1996: http://www.eco.utexas.edu/Homepages/Faculty/Cleaver/zaps.html) [08-03-2000]. The situation in Burma and on the Thai-Burma border is the same.

should imply this kind of participatory democracy where people participate in many spheres in the society.[51] Hagen builds on Anders Lindblad (1983), and argues that participation should imply both a democratisation *of* the media, and a democratisation *through* the media. It is important to note that Lindblad was concerned with local radio and television and its public. It is not unproblematic to use Lindblad almost 20 years later to explain potential consequences of the internet. However to use his ideas of a two-fold democratisation should be possible. Democratisation of the media implies public access and citizens having a chance to participate in the media. The internet and computer mediated communication have increased peoples' possibilities to contribute in this process. Democratisation *through* the media refers to the long-term effects on the democratic processes and relates the democratisation of communication to the processes of social change. Participation means access to information, which is important for a person to satisfy her/his basic human needs, to maintain a social identity, and to be a part of a cultural community.

Robert A. White (1995) seems to require more from democratic communication than Hagen does, as he places stronger emphasis on dialogue. He claims that as an ideal every citizen has the right to take part in an ongoing dialogical conversation or debate and that this participation is essential for anyone's identity:

> It implies that the person must have access to information flows that are the resources for the construction of public cultural truth, but also that every person has the right to make an active contribution as an individual and as a member of a subculture to the formation of a public cultural truth. This means that as a result of the communication process, every person should be able to recognize something of his or her identity in the given historical moment of the public cultural truth (White 1995: 95).

White is very concerned with the ideal that everyone should have the possibility to "contribute to the pool of information" and the opportunity to criticise, analyse and participate in the communication process. He has an enormous faith in the creative and rational capacities of the general public where *the logic of the popular* creates its own versions of entertainment as well as takes part in essential discussions leading up to political decisions. The logic of the popular is holistic, diverse and aimless when compared to the modern logic of instrumental efficiency and is built around the logic of trying to

[51] Ingunn Hagen discusses the competitive, the participatory and the dialogue democrats. The participatory and the dialogic model overlap, but the dialogic model builds on the theories of Jürgen Habermas and emphasizes a decision-making process built on interactive and rational persuasion between the members whereas the participatory model emphasizes that citizens must be informed about their society.

make sense out of life and trying to affirm one's identities (ibid. 97). White's arguments create grounds for an interesting discussion on what characterises social movements, and how they can use more democratic communication patterns. He defines social movements as organisations with the purpose of changing the power relations in the social systems of which they are a part. Movements develop as groups cut their ties of dependency through central exchange of information and communication and as they build up networks of resources to get more direct access and stronger influence in the collective decision making structure. This way social movements have the possibility to offer alternative information about causes and solutions to problems in a language understandable to its members. According to White the movements often use new media technologies, as this is commonly the technology which is most available to them, and they use the media not just to disperse information, but to articulate and define cultural self-identity (White 1995: 106). A culture of democratic communication emerges exactly in the contexts of social movements.

For White this democratic communication of social movements is thus the radical response required to deal with the hegemonic symbolic domination of the private market, the state, or the church. His enthusiasm for the people and their power might be somewhat exaggerated, but he does have a point, which is important in the context of this thesis. White's emphasis on how alternative means of communication is essential to minorities and their self-identity with regard to the dominant culture in the society, supports an assumption that for the Burmese the internet means they have better possibilities for participation and to maintain their self-identity as Burmese.

White probably overemphasises the possibilities for everyone to contribute with their own perspectives in the public pool of information and communication. Still these ideas might have some vital points, which serve to explain why the internet could be of major importance for the Burmese. Even so, I think it is necessary to balance the perspectives above with the deliberative perspective presented by James Slevin. He develops John B. Thompson's ideas, applies them to the internet, and argues that the internet contributes as a *space of the visible* constituted by actions and events that through processes of symbolic exchange have been made visible for the public (Slevin 2000: 181). Thompson focuses on the relation between visibility and invisibility as modern communication media have developed a new kind of *mediated publicness of openness and visibility* (Thompson 1995: 236). This new mode differs from the traditional model, which defines publicness in spatial and dialogic terms: "The very essence of public life, on this account, is the to-and-fro of argument between individuals who confront one another face-

to-face" (ibid. 244). The mediated publicness, on the other hand, detaches the visibility of actions and events from the sharing of a common locale. The space of the visible is a non-localised, non-dialogical, open-ended space in which mediated symbolic forms can be expressed and received by a plurality of non-present others (ibid. 245).[52] These spaces are thus not "dialogic spaces" fulfilling Habermas' requirements for an ideal speech situation. Modern public spheres have generally been mediated in a non-dialogical mode resulting from the break between producers and receivers of information, which is found in traditional mass media. As these breaks are less significant or do not exist on the internet, researchers have been very optimistic about the public sphere-possibilities inherent in the internet. Slevin, on the other hand, argues that the internet does not create a dialogically mediated publicness but rather facilitates a space of the visible characterised as a *deliberatively mediated publicness* (Slevin 2000: 185). Slevin tries to develop Thompson's ideas and adjust them to how the internet might transform the space of the visible (ibid. 185). A model of deliberatively mediated publicness implies that people gather in non-localised space and acquire information, encounter differing views and form reasoned judgements (ibid. 186). It derives from the idea of a deliberative democracy, which Thompson explains as:

> (…) a conception of democracy which treats all individuals as autonomous agents capable of forming reasoned judgements through the assimilation of information and different points of view, and which institutionalizes a variety of mechanisms to incorporate individual judgements into collective decision-making processes (Thompson 1995: 255).

Deliberately mediated publicness differs from a dialogical mode because it does not presuppose dialogical forms of communication. A deliberative conception is designed to contribute to people's understanding of what is going on and focuses on how to enhance the deliberative processes. The scale and complexity of institutions and the society makes a belief in a dialogic public sphere naive, and by focusing on an enlightenment-model instead, Slevin stays more down-to-earth. Slevin does not believe that all members of a society can gather in one single electronic agora based on an ideal from the ancient Greek city-state as some kind of digital public sphere.

From a deliberative perspective the Burmese outside their home country, like everybody else, need media from which they can acquire information and encounter

[52] Thompson does not distinguish the internet from other media such as radio and television. This explains how he can argue that the mediated publicness has a non-dialogic nature. As I will return to, the computer mediated publicness is not necessarily dialogic in a true sense either.

different perspectives. I claim that with the development of the internet minority groups like the exile-Burmese now have a device, which can play a key role in this process. In spite of the fact that everybody does not have access to the internet, and indeed not the capability to contribute with their views, the internet is characterised by more diverse viewpoints and perspectives than any other media. The analysis will further illustrate how the Burmese respondents appreciate this fact.

It is not evident that a public discourse is the most important aspect when it comes to computer mediated communication. Terje Rasmussen (1996) claims that communication media differ in an essential way from mass media, and that they do not mediate a public sphere in a real sense. Communication media are important by virtue of their dialogical and interactive modes, but rather than mediating as public sphere, they mediate between individuals and between individuals and social systems. Different telecommunications mediate *social relationships*. This distinction, Rasmussen claims, derives from the fact that mass media are monological, whereas communication technologies are dialogical. These two modes do in fact designate the difference between public and non-public media (Rasmussen 1996: 321-323). Rasmussen's perspective is not necessarily in conflict with Slevin's arguments. Rasmussen claims that the private conversations taking place online are of a dialogic nature. His point is that these dialogical communication-media possess features that can only be used in a non-public fashion. Slevin's and Rasmussen's perspectives combined suggest that any mediation of publicness is of a non-dialogical character, whereas computer mediated communication on the individual level is of a dialogical mode. Theoretically the internet and computer mediated communication should have a considerable importance for Burmese using the internet, and their sense of community. CMC works both as spaces of the visible and as dialogically mediated experiences between individuals.

4 .3.3 INDIVIDUALS IN CONTROL

Andrew Shapiro (1999) explores how technology allows individuals to take power and control from larger institutions. The internet makes possible a vast transformation of who governs information, experience, and resources. Individuals are able to control new aspects of life that were earlier limited by time and space. Shapiro is not a pure optimist, but emphasises problematic aspects with this new individual freedom as well. Still, the overall picture Shapiro draws is positive and derives from the belief in how the internet gives us an opportunity to take command and control of our interactions with the world, and how this

access to personalised information changes the individual's perception of the world. Ultimately, Shapiro claims, this will influence the way the society understands issues and itself.

The individual has not gained total control over the horizon of information. The internet has no apparent structure, gives a pretty chaotic impression and, as already mentioned, deciding how to believe what is true or not is rarely easy.[53] Lars Qvortrup (1999) calls our information saturated society *hypercomplex* (Det hyperkomplekse samfunn), a society characterised by an ever more complex world, which every citizen has to relate to. This complexity cannot be avoided, and the guiding principle becomes *polycentrism,* implying that there no longer exists one privileged perspective. The modern belief in the rational human being and in progress can no longer be accounted as the only correct answer.[54] The society has become a one world-society where one single perspective is not enough. Qvortrup further argues that the internet has naturally become the symbol of the ultimate global communication and one of the basic pillars in the hypercomplex society:

> (…) in a peculiar way, the internet is both the answer to and a reinforcement of the problem of complexity. As a decentered observance and communication system, it represents the answer to the challenge, which avoids centralistic answers. But the electronic net simultaneously reinforces the problem, as it enlarges our communicative scope (…)(Qvortrup 1999: 87, my translation).

Knowledge is acquired to handle the enormous complexity, and new communication technology is needed to obtain this knowledge. Finding more information becomes the answer and this continuous gathering of information makes things even more complicated. The world and the reality are divided into several centres and several categories of answers. In a complex world, having the ability to reflect upon one's social system becomes most important. Related to the ideas of a hypercomplex society are Lin Neumann's (1996) observations about the difficulties of relying on information on the net. Information is only as reliable as those who post it are. Individual pages can easily look official. I treated the subject of how to judge the validity of web pages in Chapter III. Here

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[53] Even professional users of the internet as an information source might be fooled. TV2, a national TV-channel in Norway, announced in December 2000 that the artist Eminem was dead. The researchers had received a tip and a link to an apparently genuine CNN-page that could inform that Eminem had died in a car-crash.

[54] Qvortrup's ideas are similar to different postmodern ideas. According to Rasmussen (1995), Lyotard understands postmodernity as a discourse explaining our unstable and chaotic time. Like Qvortrup, Lyotard

it is sufficient to say that with the decentralised structure of hypertextual nodes, the reader must develop a critical literacy in order to make sense of the many competing views available on the net, and to be able to distinguish the different sources of information.

> But to someone who once clipped newspaper articles and coordinated phone trees of human rights issues, it is clear that the internet is offering activists and others with a burning need to stay informed a wealth of information that was previously hard to come by (Neumann 1996).

The virtuous human being in the hypercomplex world is thus a balanced individual, conscious about her own weaknesses and the fact that it is not possible to know everything in such an information-saturated world. Shapiro argues that the solution to handle the massive amount of information is the possibility to personalise information. Filtering the impressions becomes necessary to deal with "what would otherwise be an overwhelming tidal wave of data" (Shapiro 1999: 106). Instead of drowning in the tidal wave, we use filtering tools to screen out information we do not want.[55]

When choosing from an enormous amount of information, the selection of data naturally caters to our personal interests. Shapiro considers this kind of filtering a problem if it leads to self-imposed ignorance and narrow-mindedness, which ultimately might lead to a loss of diverse experience and a flattening of perspective. He uses the psychological theories of Leon Festinger and his concept of *selective avoidance* as a point of departure. People seek to avoid dissonance, and they look for what they already know. People do not want their perspectives to be challenged, and when they are challenged the important thing is to achieve consonance. Changing the environment is rarely possible, and this way, Festinger argues, people learn to achieve consonance, that is cognitive consistency, by altering their underlying views and behaviours (Festinger 1962). Shapiro argues that the internet makes possible what he calls *total filtering,* an absolute personal control over experience. The control revolution provides the opportunity of total filtering, which functions as a shield from any provoking experience. This will ultimately dull our senses and imagination. One might ask whether people now have too much control over the retrieval of information and with whom they want to communicate. Knowing how a control revolution of this kind effects our horizons is difficult, but I believe Shapiro exaggerates the dangers of personal filtering. From a theoretical point of view, especially if

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argues that the belief in an universal rationality is no longer possible. The major discourses and authorities have only been a device to describe the reality, and these discourses are no longer validate.

[55] BurmaNet News is one of these filtering tools. As Shapiro notes, part of the value with these tools is to give individuals information they might not otherwise get. This is an obvious feature with BurmaNet.

focusing on the context within which this the information retrieval and computer mediated communication takes place, this seems to be a minor problem. People want more than they know in advance and there will continue to be demand for general news- and information services. Shapiro also admits that there will be moments when we are not in total control. Steven Johnson has a point when in an interview with Andrew Shapiro, he comments:

> But I still feel that compared to where we were 30 years ago, the web has been a tremendous force for more randomness. Day to day, we are closer to things that we had never expected to stumble across in the first place because of the web being put in all our living rooms.[56]

There does not seem to be a conflict between filtering-services and general news-services. People will still see the evening news and have access to and use other mediated discourses. I will explore this issue in more depth in Chapter VI when analysing the empirical material. A certain degree of personalising and filtering of information is necessary when there are so many sources of information, but I do not believe this will make us discover only what we want to discover in advance (which would certainly take the fun out of discovering).

4.4 UNREACHABLE THEORIES?

What are the implications of the perspectives outlined above? Before presenting the analysis, I will summarise some implications and suggest tentative predictive patterns. This will clarify the structure of the next two chapters and will also show that the theories I have used are not living their own lives independent of what I am trying to explore. This is especially important, as the literature used might seem a bit peripheral when compared to major social and political thought.

The main purpose of part 4.2 concerning the social context has been to present a persuasive discussion that using computer technology creates a basis for online communities among the Burmese. This will be the focus in Chapter V. The internet works as a mediator of Burmese culture through storing and reproducing information and by granting its users a possibility to participate and communicate with one another. This has considerable importance for maintaining a Burmese identity. Since the first experience of writing, the mediation of human experience has influenced people's self-identity. The internet is another device in this process. Furthermore, I stress that one must not loose sight

[56] http://www.feedmag.com/re/re250.2.html [27-02-2001]

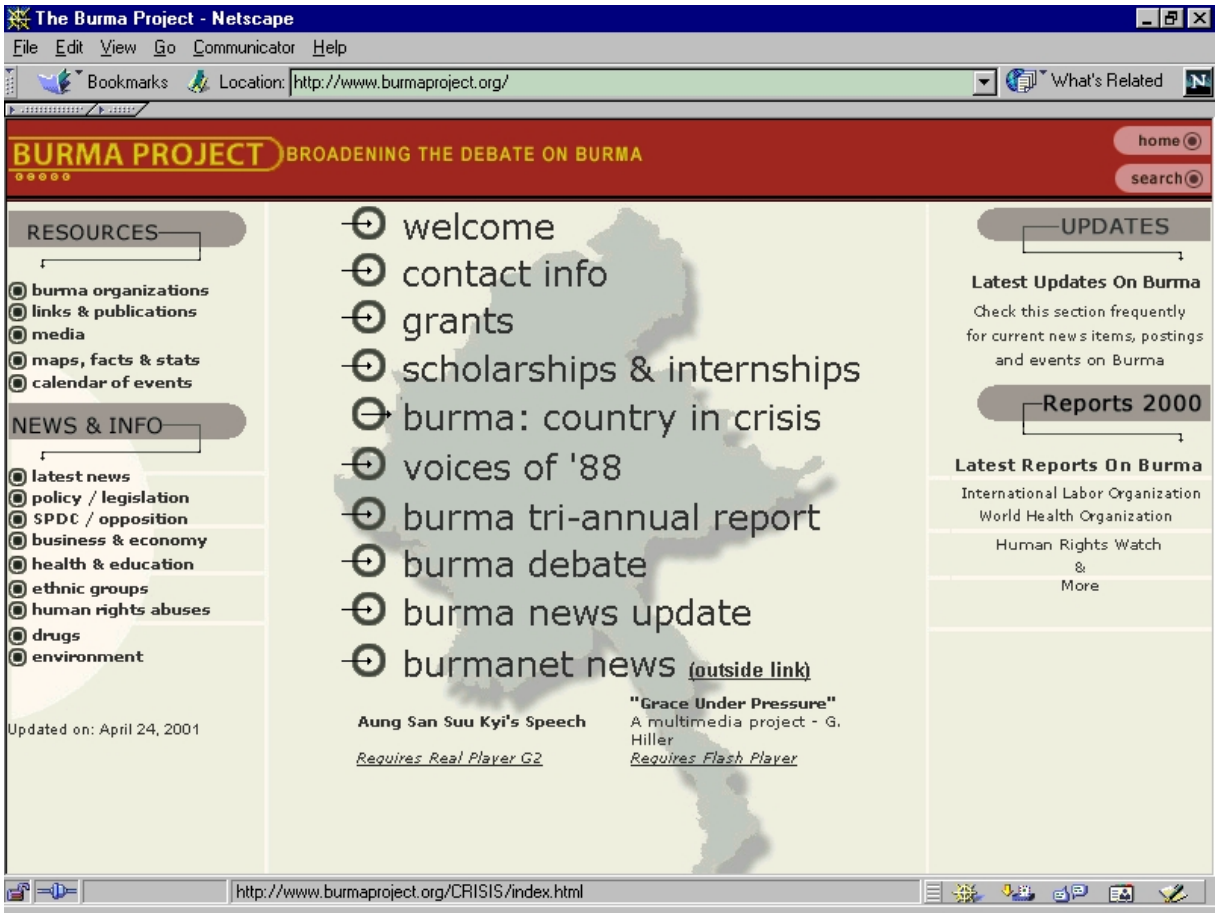
of the *social context,* as I see the online activity as intertwined with the direct social environment and direct linguistic practices. Modern communication technology opens up opportunities for human associations, but I expect the online Burmese communities to be extensions of existing social networks.

The political significance of the internet for the Burmese will be the theme in Chapter VI. The core arguments in this chapter have concerned how the internet is a favourable device for groups like the Burmese. The internet serves as an instrument to disperse information and create meaning and knowledge. This is important, as Burmese-related issues rarely are covered by the general mass media. Information, knowledge and possibilities to communicate are crucial in the fight for democratic development. However, using the internet as a source of information and knowledge seems to require a developed critical literacy. Although computer mediated communication might democratise communication by giving more people the possibility to utter their voices, this is not totally unproblematic. The increased possibilities to publicise private opinions make a conscious critical reading essential.

In addition, I have treated why it is important for people to take part in communication processes and to get access to improved sources of information. Taking part in both social and political communities is essential for developing and maintaining a self-identity, and the possibilities the internet offers might have positive implications for the interviewees' sense of belonging and identity as Burmese. The internet offers an arena where the Burmese can acquire information, encounter differing views and form reasoned judgements. What goes on and the different perspectives that exist become more visible to people, and they will thus feel they are more part of the processes.

I have deduced some patterns from the theoretical perspectives. These patterns are decisive for the analysis in the next two chapters, and the analysis will give fairly comprehensive answers to the superior questions that were the starting point for the whole thesis.

Screen-shot



Burma Project is an extensive web-site connected to Open Society Institute. Their pages reach out to exile Burmese as well as the general public and facilitate information concerning the political situation in Burma. They are highly critical towards the authoritative system in Burma and the lack of freedom of speech and assembly.

The Burma Project pages are frequently updated and contain links to several other Burma-related web-sites.

Screen-Shot

The Irrawaddy Publishing Group (IPG) publishes the Irrawaddy Magazine. Exile-Burmese established the group in 1992. They claim to be independent of any political party or organisation and promote freedom of speech.

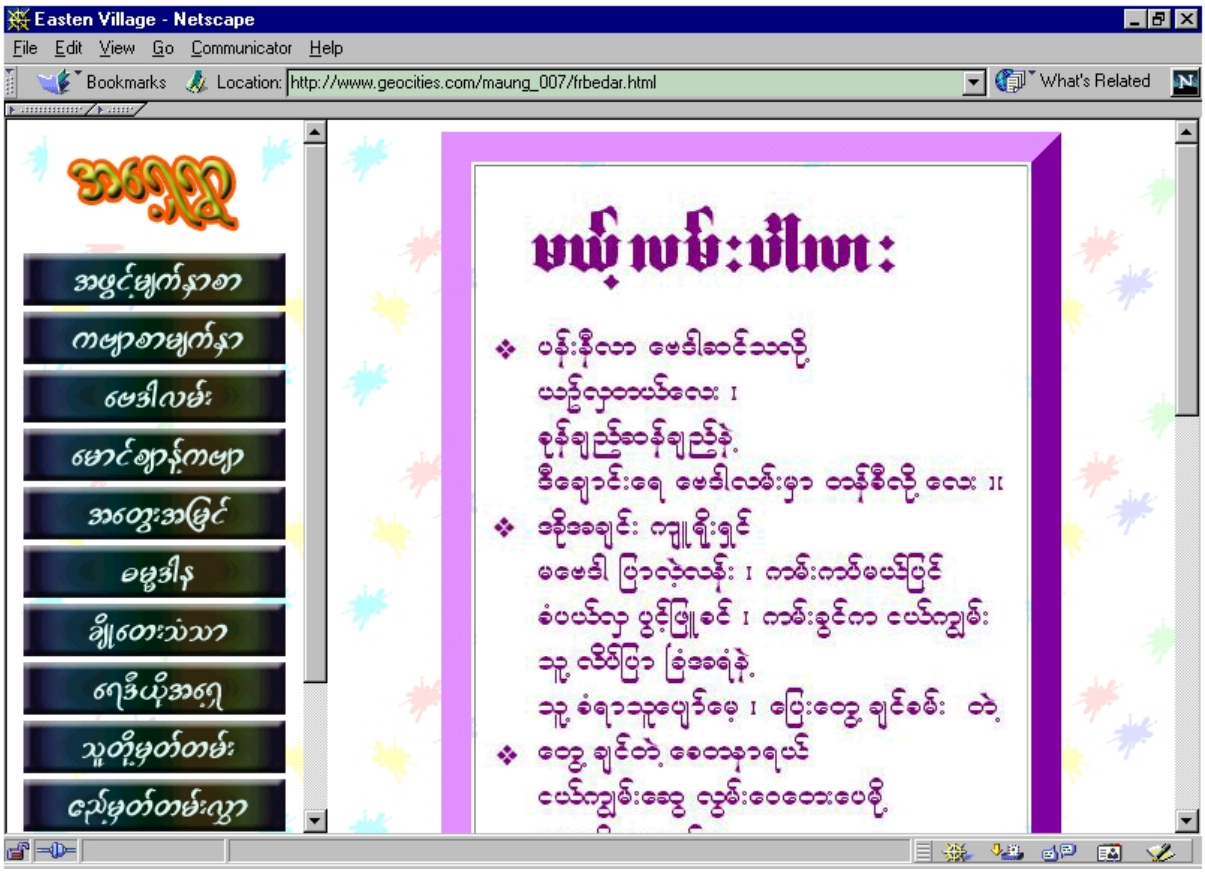
At least a couple of the respondents in this inquiry read the Irrawaddy magazine on a regular basis.

Screen-Shot

This is from the official state-controlled newspaper in Myanmar, *New Light of Myanmar*. The paper is available both in Burmese and in English. The extract illustrates how the media in Burma are mainly concerned with different meetings that have been taking place and less interested in more substantial matters.

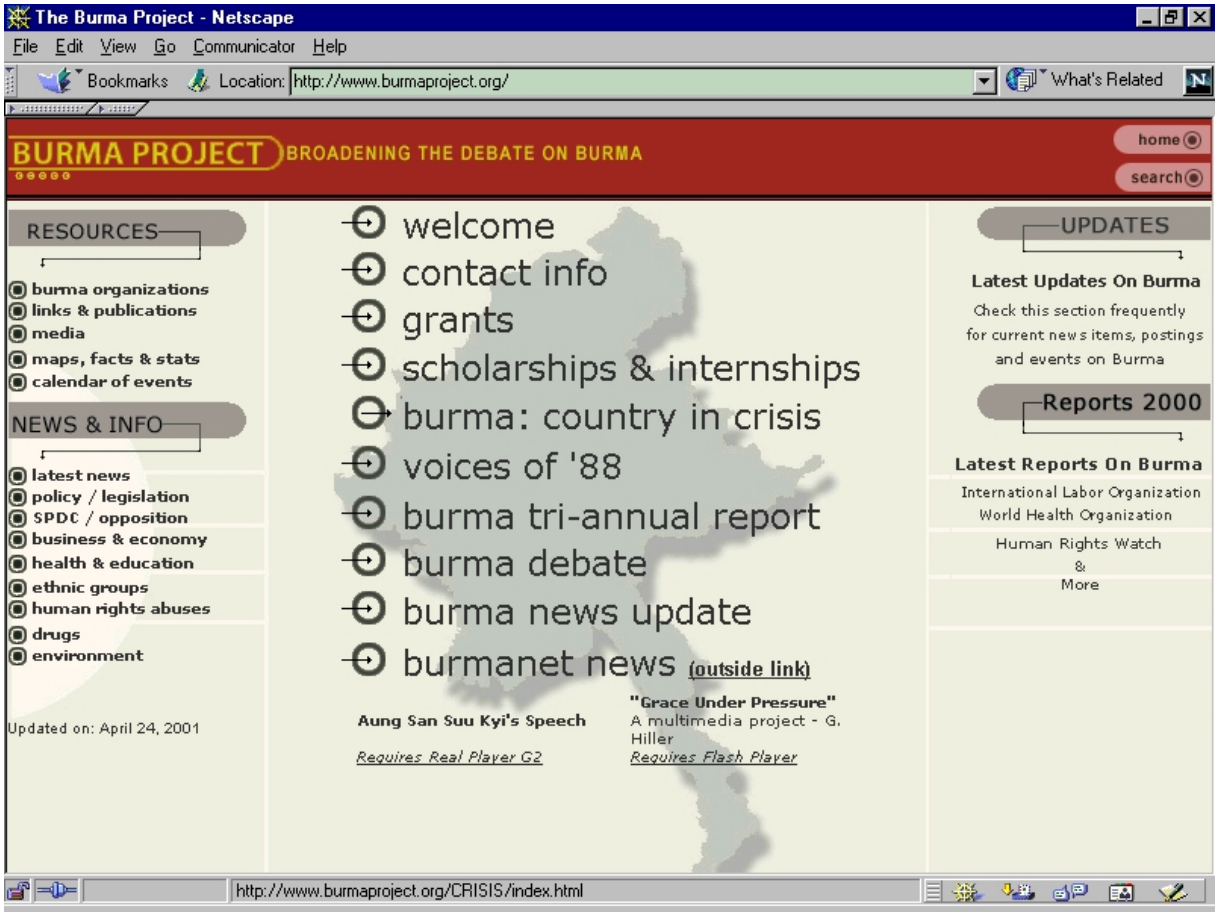
New Light of Myanmar is available on http://www.myanmar.com, which is the official web-site of Myanmar. These pages contain information about business-opportunities, tourism, and present a picture of a harmonious and golden country.

Screen-shot



This site contains Burmese poems, here presented with one of them.

Screen-shot 1



Burma Project is an extensive web-site connected to Open Society Institute, which can be found at http://www.soros.org/osi.html [01-05-2001]. The Burma Project-pages reach out to exile-Burmese as well as the general public and facilitate information concerning the political situation in Burma. They are highly critical towards the authoritative system in Burma and the lack of freedom of speech and assembly.

The Burma Project pages are frequently updated and contain links to several other Burma-related web-sites.

Screen-Shot 2

The Irrawaddy Publishing Group (IPG) publishes the Irrawaddy Magazine. Exile-Burmese established the group in 1992. They claim to be independent of any political party or organisation and promote freedom of speech.

At least a couple of the respondents in this inquiry read the Irrawaddy magazine on a regular basis.

Screen-Shot 3

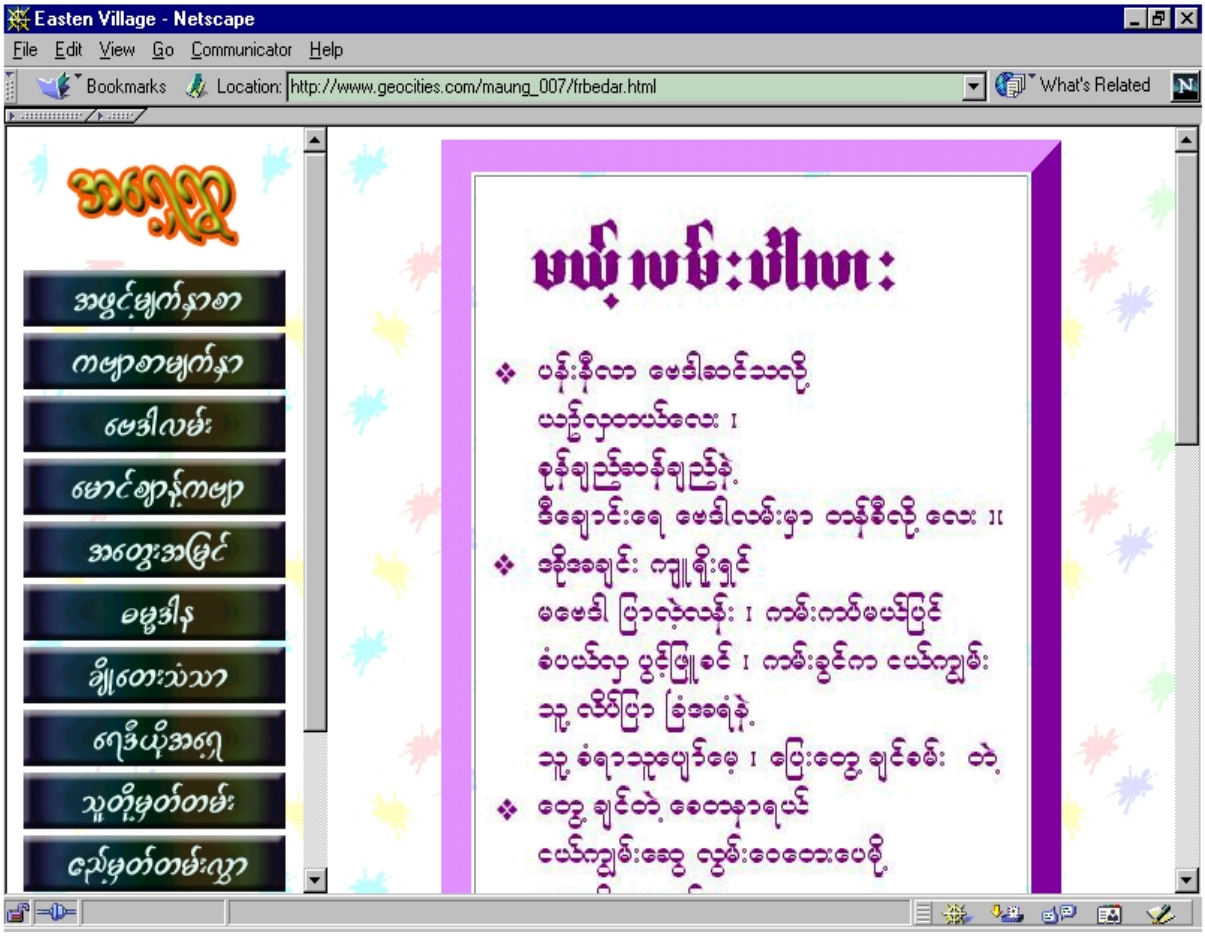
This is from the official state-controlled newspaper in Myanmar, *New Light of Myanmar*. The paper is available both in Burmese and in English. The extract illustrates how the media in Burma are mainly concerned with different meetings that have been taking place and less interested in more substantial matters.

New Light of Myanmar is available on http://www.myanmar.com, which is the official web-site of Myanmar. These pages contain information about business-opportunities, tourism, and present a picture of a harmonious and golden country.

Screen-shot 4

This is the front-page of one of the Yahoo! Clubs I have joined. One prime function of these clubs seems to be the message board where members contribute with more or less serious personal views, meanings and opinions and links to other web-sites they like. Otherwise these sites also function as arenas where members can find the Yahoo!-id of other members and hence have the possibility to contact others.

Screen-shot 5



This site contains Burmese poems and eastern music. The pages are mainly written in Burmese, without comprehensive English translations.

Screen-shot 6

The Free Burma Coalition is an umbrella group of organisation around the world located in Washington DC. Their pages are frequently updated.

Their mission statement:

> *The Free Burma Coalition (FBC) is an umbrella group of organizations around the world working for freedom and democracy in Burma. Our mission is to build a grassroots movement inspired by and modeled after the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Our movement stands 100% behind the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD), whom the people have recognized as the sole legitimate leaders of Burma.*

Screen-shot

This is the front-page of one of the Yahoo! Clubs I have joined. One prime function of these clubs seems to be the message board where members contribute with more or less serious personal views, meanings and opinions and links to other web-sites they like. Otherwise these sites also function as arenas where members can find the Yahoo!-id of other members and hence have the possibility to contact others. This way several Burmese have contacted me.

Chapter V

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INTERNET AS A MEDIATOR OF CULTURE

THE TITLE of this chapter may seem ambitious. It promises an analysis that illustrates how Burmese use the internet as a cultural arena. To begin with, maintaining a Burmese culture and identity is of significant importance for the interviewees. Some live in political exile in London or Oslo. Others are in London primarily to finish their studies, with the intention of going back to Burma when they are done. Nevertheless, all respondents share a belief in the importance of keeping on to their Burmese heritage:

> Before I came here, I decided that I would never change my nationality, and I would always be a Burman. That's why I still stick so hard to my nationality. I don't want to become a British citizen. I love my country, and I want to be a Burmese. So I'll never, never change (27-year-old female student).

Despite different political orientations and experiences from Burma, the respondents are highly conscious of their Burmese background and give an impression that Burma will always be their native country, and that Burmese culture will always be the culture they are most familiar with. The interesting aspects are therefore whether using the net is of any importance for keeping close to Burma, and, as the title suggests, the internet as a mediator of culture. This seems to be especially important, as the Burmese now live in Western countries with highly different cultures, religion[57], values and norms. Before presenting the analysis in this chapter and the next, it is important to explore how the respondents may experience living in a Western country physically and culturally very far from Burma.

Presenting a picture of living in exile in a Western country as opposed to living in Burma is important to understand their situation. This will illuminate a necessary context to understand if, why, and how the respondents value the internet and computer mediated communication as usable devices. The following interview extract is telling:

> London is very different from my country. We have to adjust, and it's not easy. We were a big family with lots of relatives in Burma. Here there are no relatives at all. Some

[57] Most of the interviewees are Buddhist (see Appendix III). One is however Karen. Karens are a Christian minority in Burma. The cultural differences to Western societies are nevertheless fundamental.

> people might not believe that it is hard, but I lived through it and it is. I never want to live through it again (22-year-old female student).

The student above fled from Burma with her family in 1992. They first lived in Scotland, which she hated, before moving to London, where she did not feel as foreign and as different as she had felt in Scotland. To her moving to the West was not what she thought it would be when she arrived at 14. She believed moving to the West meant getting new clothes and other material things, and first realised what she had left when she arrived. Although she now enjoys living in London, getting used to the Western way of living and Western custom was not at all as easy as she thought it would be. Her story is not very dramatic if compared with several of the other stories. Nearly half of the respondents have a political history from Burma. Some have been in prison or have close relatives who have spent years in Insein prison or some other prison. Several respondents had to run away from their home country due to lack of security. The story of the 22-year-old student is nevertheless important, as her story illustrates that living in a foreign country with a foreign culture is not easy. Above all her story implies that keeping in touch with your cultural tradition makes it easier to live through such a situation. For the 22-year-old student living in exile in a free country also contributed to her getting interested in politics:

> The good thing is that we have freedom here. We can say whatever we want, and we don't have to be afraid of the government. The way I think is so different from the way my friends in Burma think. I know that I don't have to be afraid of anybody. (…) I am grateful that I came here to experience freedom. Otherwise I would never have known. I would have thought that the whole world is like Burma. That was what I was thinking back in Burma. They way we lived was natural. (…) So I thought that this is the way everybody are living in this world.

She has learnt what freedom is about, and she wants to pass the idea of freedom on to other people in Burma. Possibly the most important thing I learnt from her was that she actually did not know what she was missing when she lived in Burma. She was very young at the time, and although there are many Burmese in Burma knowing at least partly what they are missing, her story illustrates that this does not account for everyone. As will be apparent in the next chapter part of the explanation is the very repressive media system in Burma. In the end some people believe that what the military regime tells you at least in some degree is true.

5.1 ESTABLISHING AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

I analyse the social and cultural aspects of the internet in this chapter, before exploring the political roles in the next. I explore and analyse how the respondents value the possibilities

for information retrieval and the opportunities to keep in touch by using the internet. Based on this analysis I will make some tentative comments on whether the internet can be said to have any importance when it comes to the maintenance of community and identity among the Burmese interviewees. The analysis depends on the theoretical implications from Chapter IV. As I have already mentioned, using these theoretical implications does not mean that I ignore empirical data that does not fit with the patterns I have predicted. My mission is to clarify some relations on what significance the internet has, and I do not believe the way to go is to specifically look for information that is congruent with my own views. Still my expectations have been guiding through the whole process and have obviously made me ask certain questions and ignore others. This has on the other hand not been a conscious choice. I have as far as possible tried to give a balanced presentation.

Computer mediated communication and information retrieval are the basic pillars for the development of the online communities. Due to the specific situation of living far from friends and relatives, the internet might present an interesting opportunity for the interviewees. Likewise, as the Burmese cannot rely on mass media for update information on Burma, they might find the internet a valuable alternative. An article in *Los Angeles Times* about The easyEverything cafe on Times Square illustrates my point. This is the largest cafe of its kind with 800 computers available. Immigrants, poor people and tourists generally use these computers: "In a land that has been permeated by the Internet over the last five years, the cafe has found a new niche as a pay-by-the-hour lifeline for the mobile, the poor and the digitally dispossessed" (Colker 2001).[58] According to Colker's article the cafe is in large part dominated by immigrants who come here to communicate with family and friends in other parts of the world.

Based on the theoretical discussion in the previous chapter one could claim that the internet helps to maintain a sense of community and identity among the Burmese. This is a consequence of how the internet mediates social action and culture among the participants. The analysis explores how the internet can be said to take part in the mediating of social action and is based on the fact that this mediating takes place in a social context. The interviewee's background and personal characteristics might thus become important.

[58] David Colker (2001): http://www.latimes.com/business/updates/lat_icafe010220.htm [05-03.2001]

5.2 KEEPING UP WITH BURMA

> It sometimes works as a librarian. You don't have to go through the library to search for what you need (25-year-old male student).[59]

Scholars and researchers exploring the significance of the internet and hypertext have frequently used the metaphor of a library to explain how loads of information becomes available. I do not unconditionally support the use of this metaphor, which I do not think covers the aspects of information retrieval on the internet. I believe the librarian-metaphor is better. What neither metaphor illuminate are the more associative structures of information retrieval on the internet. The opportunity the internet offers for finding information is of important political significance, but it plays a vital social role as well. In the following pages I explore how the respondents value the possibilities the internet offers for connecting and making information available and what problems they experience when it comes to finding the information they want. The apparently unstructured nature of the internet might give some people a feeling of being lost. Contrary one could claim that the associative structure keeps them on track.

The respondents emphasise how the internet offers the possibility to find information on any subject. Although in different degrees, they all use the internet actively to find information related to Burma.

> Internet is really useful for people who want good information. You don't have to go to a library. Whenever you want to read something you can go to a web-site. You don't need to subscribe or anything. If you are making a book about Burma you can go to the UN web-site. And like here in the UK, if the Parliament have a meeting or a conference, and if they make a resolution about Burma, you can find it on the Parliament's web-site (37-year-old male political activist).

In chapter 4.2.1 I referred to James Slevin who argues that the internet plays a crucial role as a mediator of culture, as it contributes in the process of *circulating information and symbolic content in socially structured contexts*. This role becomes evident when analysing the answers from the interviews. The 37-year-old male claims that the internet makes information more available and similar phrases are common among the respondents. That the respondents claim they get access to more information by using the internet does not, on the other hand, automatically prove that Slevin is right. To investigate whether the internet as a source of information plays an important cultural role, I will therefore turn to other characteristic aspects as well. I will elaborate on how the respondents use the

[59] See Appendix III for an overview of all of the respondents.

internet, how they believe it differs from other kinds of media, how much of their use is related to Burma, and whether they find the information they want. I intend to make clear what role the information retrieval process means for their sense of belonging.

Some sites have more visitors than others. CNN and BBC are popular among most of the respondents. Both sites have extensive coverage of Southeast Asia. Other popular pages are BurmaNet, the Free Burma Coalition Site, UN-sites, and the web-sites of the radio-stations VOA and DVB. Keeping up with what goes on in Burma seems to be of great importance for all of the interviewees. As the 22-year-old female student answered when I asked her if keeping up with what is going on in Burma is important for her: "Obviously. It's where I've lived, it's where I come from, so it's good to know what's happening". The interviewees were asked how much they use the internet to follow what is going on in Burma. The answers illustrate that some use it primarily to find information about Burma and to communicate with other Burmese, whereas others also use it for non-Burmese related issues. The students naturally use the internet in connection with their studies in addition to reading news about Burma. The web-editor uses the net extensively to learn more about her profession. The interviewees illustrate that they are interested in other things besides Burma and their use of the internet reflects this fact.

The interviewees obviously appreciate the opportunity to find information about their home country. Slevin's claim that the net takes part in the mediation of culture thus seems to be supported by my empirical data. I further discovered that most of them are very conscious the various quality and reliability of online information,[60] in what ways it differs from other media, and why these specific features serve dispersed groups like the exile-Burmese:

> There's a difference. You can get a lot of information from the internet. If you listen to the radio or watch TV, you get what they want to inform people. Whereas if you have the internet, you can get a lot of information on whatever you want. With the media it's different: you can listen to whatever they want to tell you, that's the difference. Internet is whatever you want (37-year-old male political activist).

With the internet you get what you want. The respondent above indicates that he feels he is more in control when using the internet than if he would have had to rely on other media. He finds the information he needs, and does not have to take what the media prefer to offer him.[61] The 53-year-old doctor has a similar idea of the internet as the respondent above:

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[60] How the interviewees perceive the reliability of information will be discussed in 6.2.3.

[61] This might support Andrew Shapiro's arguments of the internet as facilitating a control revolution. I return to this in Chapter VI.

> I think that the internet is wider than other kinds of media. It's wider and more useful. Newspapers and other media magazines are limited. We don't get what we want. Whereas from the internet we can get anything, anytime, as long as we know what is right and what is wrong.

The last sentences of these two passages concern the same aspect about getting what you want, and the internet as a source you can use the way that suits you. Almost everything is there. A couple of respondents also emphasise that the information is there *when* you need it. The 30-year-old male technician told me: "People can listen only once to a BBC show. People who don't have a chance to listen will miss it. But if you use the internet you are free to visit whenever you have the chance". Similarly, the 27-year-old female student argues that the internet is more effective and flexible: "If I want to read something that was written a week ago, I can easily find it on the internet. I can trace back what happened. (…) TV is more for current situations. You can't trace back".

In chapter 4.3.1 I explain how information and knowledge is important to develop a fundament for consciousness and participation in societies. The respondents show that they appreciate accessing information relevant for the Burmese situation. Information concerning Burma brings their home country a little bit closer. The ideas of Robert A. White can partly explain how these alternative sources of information are essential for a sense of belonging and self-identity. In chapter 4.3.2 I referred to White's argument that new technologies are often utilised by social movements to offer alternative information not provided by mass media. Movements do not solely use alternative media to spread the word, but also to articulate and define cultural self-identity. This seems to be the case with the Burmese and their use of the internet. However, it should be emphasised that using the net is only one of several ways for the Burmese to maintain their identity as Burmese.

Almost everything is available on the net if you know how to find it, and if you know how to distinguish the many sources of information. The respondents explicitly declare this. They generally give the impression of knowing how to find what they need. The 37-year-old activist and the 53-year-old doctor are both well educated, but although both are among those who get the most out of the internet, the discrepancies between the different respondents are not very apparent. "On the internet you can just click, and then everything is in front of you", said one of the 22-year-old female students, referring to how the internet contains everything you need. The other 22-year-old emphasises how "I don't have to flip through pages either. I just go to the topic that I like and I get what I want". Using Shapiro's allegory, the respondents do not drown in the tidal wave of information. They control the information and find what they want and what is relevant for their

Burmese identity. Neither age nor education seems to make a major difference for the ability to handle the large amounts of information.[62] On the other hand, education and profession play a central role as arenas where they get access to computers, internet and email. Just a few respondents have private computers and have to rely on using computers on campus, on their work place, or in an organisation. The decisive factors seem to be access to computers and some experience with the internet. How the interviewees filter information will be further discussed in chapter 6.3.3.

So far it seems clear that the internet plays a crucial role for the respondents, giving them a chance to keep up with the developments in Burma. Their cultural and social background seems to be influential for what they are looking for, but they all try to follow the main headlines. The net seems to be essential for the circulation of information and symbolic content, and therefore to have a cultural function for the Burmese. On the other hand, this implies that people find what they are looking for. The 24-year-old male student/novice seems to be inhibited by his knowledge, and does not always feel that he finds what he needs. He has lived in London since February 1999 and is fascinated with the freedom of expression he experiences in England.[63] The respondent enjoys using the internet, but he believes he needs more experience before getting the most out of it. Despite his self-perceived minor knowledge of finding relevant information on the internet, he claims it is not possible to stay informed about Burma without using the internet. He appreciates what he finds, but he seems to believe that there still is more to it. He is very optimistic about learning more and learning how to find precisely what he wants.[64] The respondent was very politically active in Burma and had already been aware of the political situation in the demonstrations in 1988. He has since then been actively taking part in the pro-democracy activities in Burma, which made it difficult for him to stay. Considering this, it is no wonder he values the internet as an information source, and why he is so eager to learn more. His perceptions and expectations regarding the internet as an information source should be understood towards this context.

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[62] As this is a qualitative case study, I cannot generalise and say that age or education does not matter for Burmese or people in general. I can only say that this seems to be the case with these specific interviewees.

[63] "This country is very different from my country. In my country there is only one radio line that's all. It was very strange for me because there is so much here: radio-stations, TV-programs. So it is very different. Now my ears are open. In my country they are only talking about other things" (24-year-old male student).

[64] The answers this respondent gave might have been influenced in a positive direction if he believed I expected him to give positive answers. I did, however, get the impression that these were his opinions. This impression is further confirmed as he did tell me what he thought of as difficult with finding information on the net.

Net novices are not the only ones who might experience a hard time finding what they are looking for. Although the 30-year-old male technician mostly is satisfied with the net, he says he sometimes feels overwhelmed with information

> Last week I wanted to find information on some women-issues. I searched and received too many headings or topics. You have to spend a lot of time to find what you really want.

Still, the respondents seem to be surprisingly little inhibited by the unstructured information on the internet, and both of the respondents above are more interested in praising the internet as a convenient source of information than criticising that it sometimes is hard to find what you want.

5.3 MEDIATING SOCIAL ACTION AND ENCOURAGEMENT

The argument that the internet contributes in the process of mediating culture and social action is based on John B. Thompson's idea of "modalities of cultural transmission" (Thompson 1990: 146). Thompson refers to apparatuses, which are specially constructed and deployed for the exchange of symbolic forms.[65] The internet and computer mediated communication can thus be understood to mediate culture among its users. As I wrote in Chapter IV, Thompson understands culture as meaningful symbolic forms and to understand these, one has to look at these forms in their cultural contexts (see 4.2.1). The mediated culture must thus be seen in the relevant cultural context. The following analysis will examine how the internet can be said to take part in the mediating of culture and social action among the Burmese. The most essential questions concern how they understand computer mediated communication, how they use it, and what it means for them.

5.3.1 BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

After some research of Burmese online communities, I had an impression that among (mostly) young Burmese people, using Yahoo! Messenger is quite common. During my research period in 2000 I joined a few Burmese clubs in Yahoo!, and I received several invitations to chats with Burmese who had found my name in the clubs.[66] These

[65] Thompson argues that even simple exchange of utterances in a face-to-face situation presupposes different technical conditions and apparatuses and refers to vocal cords, lips, air waves, etc (Thompson 1990: 146).
[66] Yahoo provides a simple device for creating clubs according to different interests. Members contribute with messages to the message boards, pictures, news, links and chats with other members. There are a number of different Burmese and Myanmar clubs with different levels of activity.

conversations all had an informal character, but they gave me an impression of how an important part of the communication structure among the Burmese worked, and also that Burmese, like everybody else value pure social relationships and not discussing politics at all times. I was thus enthusiastic about whether any of my respondents used messenger. Otherwise I expected that they valued and used email. The respondents are also more familiar with email than with synchronous modes of communication on the net. I will now treat how the respondents understand basic features with email, ICQ, messenger and chat.

Email

The respondents use email frequently to communicate with friends and family in their immediate surroundings and in other countries. The use of email to Burma is minor, and I will not elaborate any further on its significance. Email was one of the first internet devices the interviewees became familiar with, and which they first appreciated. Using email is important both for social and for political purposes. The political functions of email will be discussed in the next chapter.

Not surprisingly the respondents use email to communicate with people in other countries. "A possibility to keep in touch" is the typical phrase. It seems clear that the respondents value how the internet makes distance a minor barrier for communication:

> One of my brothers works in a small town in Thailand. We write to each other every week. I don't need to send letters. Instead I use email. It is quicker. Also you don't have to spend money on posting (30-year-old male technician).

> People who live in the jungle at the Thai-Burma border want me to send letters. Now it's easy. It just takes two minutes and they get my message. The whole world can get my message. It's much easier and much more convenient (42-year-old monk).

These are only two of the numerous quotations that could be used to illustrate that the respondents emphasise that email makes communication across borders less problematic. This possibility to communicate easily and conveniently across borders is important. Despite very different social contexts, they share the same understanding of this specific characteristic of email.

Conquering distance is however not revolutionary, as the telephone just as easily can be used to communicate across borders. The difference is the insignificant cost of using computer mediated communication as opposed to more expensive long-distance telephone conversations.

> If you make a phone-call to the US or another country, it costs you a lot. But if you just write an email it doesn't cost you too much. You can also get response within some minutes (30-year-old female web-editor).

Communicating via email is quick and inexpensive. These are features people who live separate from each other appreciate. The respondents have congruent views of the advantages of email, and they all highlight the same aspects. Besides reducing the significance of distance, and the fact that email is an inexpensive way of keeping in touch, they point to how email is quick, efficient, easy, and more convenient than writing letters. One of the 22-year-old women stresses how lazy she is when it comes to writing letters and how difficult it is to come up with something interesting to write. But she has no problems with writing emails. Emails are much easier to write because, "you just talk to each other like normal". She finds this mode of communication much more convenient and interesting, as she writes about what happens in her day to day life. This may at first seem strange. Can she not write about her day-to-day life in an ordinary letter? A possible answer might be found if we go back to what characterises computer mediated communication. The views of the 22-year-old respondent seem to fit with what David Kolb writes about CMC. He argues that although email is a written medium, it has more of the feel and style of oral communication (Kolb 1996: 15). Email messages are rapid and short, and its topics get developed in the exchange of shorter messages. In other words, because emails are convenient and inexpensive, they can be shorter, and because they immediately reach the recipients who quite easily can respond, the emails resemble conversations. This is probably why the interviewee feels that writing emails is a lot easier than writing letters.

It seems obvious that the respondents value the possibility to communicate with people far away. However, the possibility of communicating with people in their immediate surroundings is also important. In line with Wellman and Gulia's arguments about the telephone (see Chapter I), the Burmese tend to use email to write to their nearest friends just as frequently as to those who live far away. People do not always find time for meetings face-to-face even when they live in the same city. One female respondent says: "I have friends in London that I haven't seen for ages. We talk on the phone sometimes, but we have regular email contact". The 53-year-old doctor emphasises that meeting people face-to-face is not always possible. He works both as a psychiatrist at the hospital and has a general practice. In addition he is occupied as a senior co-ordinator for a part of National League for Democracy. Email is therefore very important for him to keep up a correspondence with the exile government. But even as he mostly uses email to

communicate with his fellows in the US and India, he also argues that it is an important device that saves him from a lot of meetings:

> If I'm meeting someone we have to do an appointment. We are all very busy, and we don't have much time to meet. By using the internet we can meet each other any time, any second, any minute. We can meet each other easier with the internet (53-year-old male doctor).

The respondents find email valuable for communicating both with people far away and in their surroundings. It is difficult to maintain regular contact with a large and dispersed network. Computer mediated communication makes it a little easier. The situation for the Burmese are still not the same as for the Canadians Wellman and Gulia (1998) interviewed. They found that the Torontians they interviewed used the telephone to fill in the gaps between physical meetings. The interviewees have close friends, family members and colleagues in other countries, with whom they communicate frequently. They value email as one of the best devices to communicate across geographical borders. On the other hand some of the Burmese stress the importance of the telephone and meeting people face-to-face. This does not necessarily diminish the function of email, as the different communication apparatuses are supplements to each other. The respondents use both telephone and email. Some of them prefer computer mediated communication like email while others prefer the telephone. It is not necessary to elaborate in more depth on the differences between telephone and email. The case in this thesis is communication processes and information retrieval on the internet, and therefore the telephone is not relevant (although it would have been very interesting to see the telephone in relation to other modes of communication).

ICQ, messenger and other synchronous modes of computer mediated communication[67]

Email is a rapid but asynchronous kind of mediated communication. The sender does not know whether the recipient is online or not, and the communication process does not depend on the participants being online simultaneously. Synchronous modes of mediated communication are on the other hand dependent on active participants taking turns in the

[67] I have only explored Yahoo! Messenger and do not have experience with the messenger from Microsoft. There are no significant differences when it comes to using the Yahoo! or MSN Messenger. I will therefore not pay any further attention to the subject. The reader should still be aware that when I treat mediated communication in messenger, I talk about the Yahoo! version. See Appendix II for an example of a conversation I have had with a Burmese in messenger. ICQ is a simultaneous CMC-device, which provides

communication process. Synchronous mediated communication takes the form of a dialogue in different ways. The conversation in an open chat-group is typically more fragmented and with several conversations taking place at once. Messenger is the focus here, as it seems to be more common to use messenger than to participate in chats. As mentioned earlier, I have had several informal messenger conversations with young Burmese people in other countries.

First of all messenger shares the same basic features as email. Like email, messenger reduces the significance of distance, it reduces the costs, it is more convenient, and it is a rapid mode of mediated communication. But the synchronous nature gives it some characteristic features and advantages as well. Three respondents use messenger on a regular basis, and they mainly use messenger and ICQ to talk about social matters. Being online with other people means having a possibility to communicate in a dialogical mode. The result is a conversation, which has more similarities with talking than with email. The participants do not have the chance to use intonation or gestures,[68] but the written dialogue is still perceived as a dynamic kind of conversation.

Although it seems like it is more common for Burmese to use some kind of messenger or ICQ, chats have their function as well. Researchers on CMC have typically claimed that people are more open in chats and that conversations easily get very personal.

> You can still talk openly with them, even if these are people you don't know. Sometimes they tell you stuff, and they are funny, and you can be friends. Not for a long time, but just when you are talking. It's a feeling that you can talk to anybody in the world. And it's a quite good feeling (22-year old female student).

This respondent is very confident with using the internet and she uses email, messenger and chat on a regular basis. She is very outgoing, politically active and interested in other people. These factors clearly contribute to the fact that she finds the different forms of CMC very useful, and that for her these apparatuses deploy a role in the exchange of symbolic forms. Although she uses computer mediated communication more than most of the other respondents, CMC plays an important role for all. As will be explored in greater depth, computer mediated communication cannot be seen as isolated from other forms of communication. Furthermore, the communities that evolve out of these shared arenas for communication seem to be extensions of already existing communities among the Burmese.

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different modes of communication: chat, voice, message board, data conferencing, file transfer or internet games.

[68] The development of emoticons cannot replace physical gestures or intonation in talking.

5.3.2 MAINTAINING A SENSE OF BELONGING AND COMMUNITY

In the remainder of the chapter I will infer what these understandings of computer mediated communication imply for the sense of community and identity among the interviewees. The respondents were explicitly asked how they perceived a possible community among Burmese, and whether one could possibly talk of online communities. In Chapter IV I referred to how Rasmussen claims that the internet and communication technologies mediate social action and how communication technology depends on the communicative interaction between the participants. Rasmussen's perspective combined with Slevin's argument of the internet as involved in a cultural transmission in the process of circulating information and symbolic culture, provide a basis for claiming that the internet offers possibilities to maintain a sense of community and belonging.

Whether using the internet, the phone, or writing letters, the respondents emphasise the importance of keeping in touch despite living in different parts of the world. My point of departure was not that the internet changes something that does not already exist. I believed that using the internet makes it easier to communicate and to get relevant information about Burma, and that these enhanced possibilities increase the feeling of belonging to a community.

Conquering distance, rapid, inexpensive and convenient are keywords in describing how the respondents understand computer mediated communication (as became evident in 5.3.1). These characteristics definitely imply that the Burmese find email, messenger and chats very valuable for nourishing social networks and as a means to maintaining their sense of belonging. Especially evident is the fact that it in such a degree eases communication and information retrieval with distance being nearly an irrelevant factor:

> Yes, the internet helps to maintain a Burmese community, because, you know, there are a lot of Burmese people all around the world. You can't visit them physically, but you can keep in touch with email. That's really helpful. If you phone it will cost a lot. But email is a really helpful device to communicate with each other (37-year-old male activist).

The respondent is very politically active and spends a major part of his time to organise pro-democracy activity against the military regime in Burma. A great deal of his online activity is therefore to co-operate with activists in other cities and countries. He has a lot of experience with the net, and it is not surprising that he is of the opinion that computer mediated communication might play a role in maintaining a Burmese community. After all, much of his work is totally dependent on this being a fact. The respondents have relatives and friends in other countries outside Burma, which make email or

messenger/ICQ valuable devices. The 37-year-old male answers that the internet makes it easier to keep the community dynamic. Although he is one of the most politically active respondents, there are others who emphasise that the internet makes it easier to keep social relationships alive:

> I have a very close friend. We've been friends since like we were five. She's in America. But we still tell each other everything, and our relationship hasn't changed. She left the country a year ago. We used to write to each other. And now that she is in America we talk to each other on the phone or email each other (22-year-old female student).

This is illustrative for all the respondents and also makes clear how computer mediated communication have the same function as the telephone and writing letters have. Writing letters is still the natural way of communicating with people in Burma. Unfortunately, I did not think of asking the respondent above whether her friend moving to America had improved the communication between them, as they now have the possibility to use phone and email. I would on the other hand believe this is the case as she says they used to write letters to each other, but that they now use phone and email. The main share of respondents seem to prefer phone and email/messenger above writing letters, as these types of communication are more rapid and effective ways of keeping in touch.

Another 22-year-old student had a similar experience as the one above. When asked what she thought of the internet the first time she used it, she immediately mentioned the possibility to communicate with people in far-away countries:

> I thought it was quite useful. I had a friend in Singapore, who came here to study and then she went back. I can talk to her every day. By phone, that would have cost me a lot. It's not the same.

The point should by now be clear: Computer mediated communication is generally perceived as very suitable for communication across geographical distances. The female student cited above is actually of the opinion that talking to other people on the phone is boring as well as expensive and prefers email and messenger: "It's really down to the cost. It's cheaper for a start. I mean, talking on the phone is a bit boring". That is basically why she communicates with her many Burmese friends around the world using computer mediated communication.

The interviewees above have mentioned how they generally communicate with people they already know. Most of their online relationships are with friends and relatives from when they lived in Burma. As they now do not have the possibility to meet each other, they have to rely on keeping in touch by other means. I believe this is a characteristic feature, which makes these communities different from "virtual

communities" that are being criticised for being too fragile and with too weak ties between the participants to be called real communities.

> Most of the friends I have contact with are others who have come out of Burma. We are now in different countries, and we don't have the chance to meet each other. But chatting online is really amazing. We make jokes and we recall our time at the border (30-year-old female web-editor).[69]

As this quotation should illustrate, the Burmese utilise the new social spaces that are created by computer networks, but the participants often know each other on beforehand. This makes it reasonable to believe that the online communities that exist between the Burmese should be accounted as real communities even if the participants rarely see each other in-person. This is further verified by what the three female respondents say about messenger and ICQ, which are very private arenas for the respondents. One of the 22-year-old female students explicitly states that "with email and messenger you talk to people you already know". This seems to be the case for the 30-year-old web-editor as well, who goes online to find her friends through ICQ, and rarely communicates with people she does not already know. The three respondents are reluctant to contact foreign people and prefers to use the devices to keep in touch with their friends. The 27-year-old woman says that she has got in touch with friends of her friends, and that she now is a part of a Burmese group in messenger. She does not, however, like to have conversations with foreign people, as she is afraid they will harass her.[70]

On the other hand, I have personal experience with young Burmese people who have contacted me when they see that I am interested in Burmese issues. This has led to several conversations with a 19-year-old female Burmese student in Malaysia and a 19-year-old male student in New York. I can thus not say that all Burmese people use messenger to communicate with people they already know. I soon discovered that my Burmese online friends preferred to talk about social issues. The female student in Malaysia told me that she did not feel comfortable with discussing politics at the university's computer-room. In contrast, I have had very open online conversations with Burmese concerning social and personal matters. The conversations with the 19-year-old female have primarily concerned how she likes being a student in Malaysia and what it is like living away from home (she obviously asked me questions as well). I have

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[69] The respondent was active with the All Burma Student's Democratic Front at the border between Burma and Thailand from 1988 until 1991.

[70] Girls being harassed online is not a ground-breaking fact, and I will not go any deeper into how and why this happens.

nevertheless had a few conversations concerning political matters with the 19-year-old male. Appendix II presents an extract from one of these conversations.

Based on Wellman and Gulia (1998), I find the interesting questions to concern what online relationships are like, whether the internet affects people's ability to sustain relationships, whether the participants develop attachment to online communities, and how these relations are integrated into people's overall communities. I have so far argued that the relationships that exist online more or less are extensions of already existing relationships and thus well integrated into the overall communities of the Burmese. However it is not the case that relationships only develop between people who already know each other, but it is likely that these ties are stronger than those, which develop between people who have never met in-person are. Bruce Bimber argues that strong-bonded online communities are most likely to build up between people who share the same values and norms. These communities are also characterised by stable relationships and social pressure (Bimber 1998),[71] which makes the communities more difficult to leave. The online relationships between the Burmese are a mixture of both strong ties between people who already know each other, and of weaker ties between those who do not share a long history. The common ground for these relations is how they are all based on shared interests and values. People get in touch because they want to share their experiences with other Burmese people.

For some respondents, the internet has in fact given them a chance to hook up with old friends from Burma. People, who might otherwise loose contact, have this way kept in touch.

> I sometimes loose contact with people. But as we have the Burman sites and BurmaNet, they can visit the sites, and then they can find me. So we get in touch again and are online friends (30-year-old female web-editor).

> (…) we have this Yahoo! Club from the high school that I went to. I use to visit that club, and, I mean, I kind of had the chance of getting back in touch with the friends that I haven't seen or heard from in such a long time. Some of them are in Australia, America, Singapore. I had a chance of getting their email addresses and start communicating with them again (22-year-old female student).

The possibility of finding people you actually know through using the net implies a function that other communication devices cannot provide. As a result of the interviews and the research I carried out to become familiar with the Burmese activity on the net, it

[71]Bruce Bimber (1998): http://www.polsci.ucsb.edu/faculty/bimber/research/transformation.html [13-02-2000]

became clear that some sites are more popular than others are. Meeting someone you actually know is therefore not as far-fetched as it might sound at first. These Burmese do not meet their friends by chance. Rather the getting-together is a result of Burmese who make an effort trying to gather people in networks. The different Yahoo! Clubs are an evident example: the clubs are being established to attract other Burmese, and they are often as specific as the high-school club above is.[72]

In 4.2.2 I referred to Wellman and Gulia who argue that people turn to different kinds of communities for different kinds of support. Based on the interviews I claim that this is the case with the Burmese and their use of the internet as well. One of the 22-year-old female students says that she keeps in touch both with Burmese friends abroad, and with colleges and people from her college. The interviewees' lives and interests evidently have an impact on how they use the net, and the respondents feel they belong to several different networks. To some, the Burmese network is definitely the most important one, but to others it is just one of many. The 29-year-old male student is almost indifferent to whether he is a part of a Burmese community or not, but he says that he still uses the internet to find the latest news about Burma. He does in all value the possibility to find information more than the possibilities the internet offers to communicate (he prefers the telephone to talk to his friends), and he emphasises that the internet is a good instrument in his studies.

I have until now argued that the internet might help to maintain communities and to sustain relationships among the Burmese. However, what characterises these social networks besides being communication arenas for the participants still has to be elaborated. I will now turn to Wellman and Gulia's question of whether the respondents develop attachments to these relationships. The analysis above shows that the respondents use email and messenger to talk about what goes on in their lives. As will be apparent in the next chapter mostly those who work actively with pro-democracy issues have political conversations.

[72] The 19-year-old female student with whom I have had several conversations told me that some of the Burmese students at her college had founded a club as well. This can be found at http://clubs.yahoo.com/clubs/inticollegemyanmarclub [14-12-2000]

5.3.3 KEEPING THE SPIRIT ALIVE

Although several respondents highlight the importance of talking about trivial day-to-day issues, most of them also feel that communicating with other Burmese is important as they need to talk to people with the same background.

> For me it's very frustrating being Burmese in the UK; I can't find a job because I am a Burmese. My friends tell me how they are frustrated because they can't go back to Burma. There are a lot of things. We just understand each other more. When someone comes to the US or the UK, we can teach and guide him. That's another thing, just helping each other (27-year-old female student).

In chapter 4.2.1 I referred to Terje Rasmussen who emphasises that computer mediated communication (like the telephone) is less dependent on cultural values in the society and more on the communicative interaction between the participants. Both Rasmussen and Slevin owe a lot to Anthony Giddens' ideas concerning the modern society. The interviews can furthermore easily be analysed in the light of his theories. In 4.2.2 I quoted Slevin who argues that the net continues the modern project of tearing space away from place and breaking free from local habits and customs. The similarities to Rasmussen's claim that CMC is less dependent on the cultural values in a society are evident. The point is that the interviewees seem to confirm a belief in possibilities to break free from local custom, as most of the interviewees feel they are strangers in a foreign country and therefore appreciate talking to fellow Burmese. They miss Burma and want to go back as soon as they have the chance or as soon as the political situation is different. They emphasise how they feel fellow Burmese understand them better. Keeping in touch with other Burmese makes them feel closer to home and the Burmese culture. The 30-year-old male technician says this very explicitly: "It's also about understanding each other. I live in Norway, but when some friend writes to me it's almost as if I live in Burma". The main difficulty seems to be the situation of living in exile in a foreign country:

> Even if I live in Norway, I feel like I'm a Burmese exile. This is a mental problem for us, and we need to encourage each other. We live in Norway or in Canada, but we're not happy, and we still feel that we are in exile. One day I'll have to go back to my country. That's why communicating and sharing experiences is important (36-year-old male journalist).

This respondent has a dramatic background from Burma. He participated in the uprisings in 1988, and he spent seven years in Insein prison because of his political activity, sentenced to imprisonment with hard labour and generally harsh conditions. With these experiences it is not very remarkable that he genuinely appreciates keeping in touch with other Burmese. The 30-year-old female web-editor who works with Burma-issues every

day needs her daily moments where she can socialise with Burmese friends: "I'm divided between private and work. I just want to have normal private relationship with my friends". She explains how she gets tired of talking about politics, that it is frustrating when there are no positive news-stories, and that she sometimes just wants to get out of it all. She therefore appreciates her private dialogical conversations with other Burmese people, as there are certain things her fellow Burmese friends understand better. But whatever background the respondents have from Burma, they all feel the need for regular contact with other Burmese:

> You don't want to feel that you are living in this country alone. I think that's it. (…) Even if I apply to live in this country, I don't think many people would look at me as their fellow countryman. We need some sort of sense of belonging. You have to go back to your roots. And in order to start building a sense of belonging, you communicate (25-year-old male student).

This student was not politically active in Burma. Since he left Burma in 1998 to finish his studies he has become more engaged in the situation. During the whole interview he was very conscious to highlight that the situation in Burma is utterly complex, and that as an outsider I could not understand the situation. He calls himself semi-exile, not fully wanting to identify as one who has fled the country. He did not originally flee but told me that at this point, working for BBC, he is probably not very popular with the government in Burma. He clearly makes the point that his cultural background is very different from a Western culture and for him keeping the Burmese culture alive is important. This, he said, could partly be maintained by communicating with other Burmese and visiting Buddhist- and Burmese sites: "But the thing is that we hunger for information. And various sites will provide reasonable and accurate information". He is very careful not to declare that the internet has a maintaining function for the Burmese community. Still, judging from his answers, he finds it crucial to keep in touch with other Burmese and to keep up with Burmese[73] and Buddhist issues. His emphasis on the importance of Buddhism is interesting, and deserves to be briefly commented, as it implies that more spiritual things may be essential community-building elements.

> My experience is that Burmese with a good background in their own culture are very strong people. Wherever you are in the world you are strong if you have knowledge of Buddhism and certain values. People who have a deeper understanding of culture, can

[73] He prefers keeping up with family and Burmese friends by talking to them on the phone or meeting them in-person. "It is more lively, and you have a real sense that the conversation is two-way. And on the internet you don't know the answer immediately". The respondent misses the dialogue, which he could have experienced if he used messenger or ICQ.

> maintain their identity and their roots longer than people who don't have that kind of understanding (25-year-old male student).

To this respondent Burmese culture is all about Buddhism, and talking about Burmese communities makes no sense without considering the importance of the religious aspects. To maintain Burmese unity does not necessarily have to do with living in the same geographical area, as unity is based on an inspiration and devotion, and each individual living according to the Buddhist doctrine and the eightfold path (see Chapter II). Although careful not to exaggerate the role of the internet, he clearly values it. Most importantly he points to the very significant fact that the internet does not create a community on its own, but that it has to be understood in a relevant context. There is little doubt that he finds the internet important though. He explicitly states that the religious sites in some degree give him a sense of belonging.

The respondents use the words *understanding* and *encouraging* when they describe in what ways communicating with other Burmese is important. This can be seen in the quotations above. The 27-year-old female continues her reasoning about how it is easy to feel frustrated when living in a foreign country:

> When you are living alone in a foreign country you sometimes get depressed. That is why we use the internet to encourage each other. Or we talk about family, future plans and other general stuff. I would have been really lonely without this possibility. If I didn't have the internet, I would be, really isolated and maybe lonely and more depressed.

This quotation clearly supports an argument that the internet helps to maintain a Burmese community. On the other hand, remembering the somewhat reluctant 25-year-old male student, everyone are not as persuaded. Those who are eager users of the internet both when it comes to computer mediated communication and active information retrieval likely feel that using the internet gives them a feeling of being closer to Burma. The Burmese use the net to encourage each other and as a arena where they can meet other Burmese who presumably understand them better. The analysis thus indicates that the psychological aspects for the individual users are more important than the theoretical discussion in Chapter IV suggests. Sherry Turkle (1997) has written extensively about how people may use the internet in a therapeutic way. Her points could thus have been of certain relevance also in the context of the Burmese in this inquiry. The psychological aspect of using the net seems to be of a significant importance and would deserve a more thorough elaboration.

5.4 BEING A BURMESE IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY

Throughout this chapter I have argued that the internet mediates culture, as it offers possibilities to store and reproduce information and inexpensive and effective communication facilities. I will further argue that this has significant importance for maintaining a Burmese identity. In Chapter IV I referred to Manuel Castells' understanding of identity to suggest how the internet might be used as an apparatus to create social relationships that are defined vis-à-vis "the others". These relations are based on cultural attributes that specify identity. Social relationships, networks, communities and identity are thus closely connected.

Maintaining your identity is not only about communicating with people of your own kind. When discussing the internet as a source of information I tried to highlight how these possibilities might be important also when it comes to sense of belonging. The most apparent connection is how nationality and culture is decisive for what accounts as interesting and important. Although the respondents live in either Oslo or London, they still have very strong Burmese identities, and knowing what is happening in Burma is important for them. This is especially so as almost all of the respondents intend to move back to Burma when the situation there improves (or for a few of the respondents, when they finish their studies). Burma remains their real home country. In this situation, the internet offers potentials other media cannot provide. As the respondents clearly emphasise, the internet gives you what you want, whereas these potentials are minor with other media. Keeping up with what goes on in Burma diminishes the distance to the Burmese community and thus makes it easier to be Burmese in a foreign country.

The 37-year-old political activist is only one of several who emphasises the difficult situation of being in exile in a foreign country: "I must be a part of Burma. I live here, in a Western country. But I can't forget Burma or the Burmese people". Clearly he appreciates keeping track with what is happening in Burma, and clearly Burma is a very important part of his identity. Maintaining their social and cultural identity as Burmese is important for most of the respondents.

> I've only been here for three years. I can't really tell the whole world that I am English, because I'm not. I have this strange colour, I don't look English, and I wasn't born here. I really think you shouldn't forget your roots. That's the main thing. You should remind yourself where you were born and where you're from (22-year-old female student).

The other 22-year-old female student is just as clear-cut when it comes to being Burmese: "It doesn't matter where we are. We are Burmese, and we look like Burmese. Without

Burma, we wouldn't be". I do not claim that Burmese without access to the internet forget their roots. On the other hand, there are reasons for believing that the internet is a valuable device that Burmese can use to keep close to their origins. The 27-year-old female student says she missed talking to other Burmese when she first came to London. As she discovered that she could talk Burmese on the net, this loss did not feel as crucial as it did at first. Other respondents make the same point about the importance of using the Burmese language:

> If I communicate with Burmese, I can type Burmese language. I can write what I feel, because Burmese is my language. I know English, but this is my second language, and it is more difficult to communicate. I'm not sure if people really understand. I'm not sure if you understand what I want to say. But there are no problems with other Burmese. We can use Burmese fonts. But if you are Norwegian, Spanish, or Canadian, it's difficult. Because I want to say something, but I'm not sure you really understand (36-year-old male reporter).

Burmese fonts can be downloaded from the net, and used in email, messenger and other computer and communication applications.[74] The importance of keeping the language alive seems self-evident in a discussion concerning maintaining a Burmese self-identity, both as using their native tongue makes it easier to express more accurately what they feel, and because the Burmese language constitutes a major part of the Burmese culture. Both the 25-year-old male student and the 22-year-old female student are especially concerned with keeping the Burmese language alive and point to the fact that many young Burmese in exile have poor knowledge of the Burmese language: "You can see young Burmese kids who cannot speak proper Burmese or write proper Burmese. It is so commonplace" (25-year-old male student). The 22-year-old female student argues:

> I don't care how long they have been here. They have to be able to speak Burmese. Like Indian people and Chinese people, they can speak English, and they can speak their language as well. I need my people to be like that. I see people only speaking English and not understanding, or not being able to write or read Burmese. I don't think this is right.

There are several sites that use the Burmese language and Burmese fonts, and the language is also used between Burmese in email, messenger or chats. English pages are nevertheless more common. Burmese is the official language in Burma, but the different Burmese minorities have their own languages. Burmese sites with the intention of reaching out to all of the minorities and the international community in general therefore use English. Still the

[74] One of several sites offering Burmese fonts: http://www.nandawon.demon.co.uk/burmese-fonts/index.htm [29-04-2001]

possibilities to communicate in Burmese and to access web-sites using the Burmese language evidently is an important possibility.[75]

Keeping in touch with Burmese friends and family members evidently is important to maintain a Burmese identity. The specific characteristics of computer mediated communication are important as they ease the communication process considerably, which again might increase the frequency and length of conversations. Like the 22-year-old student who is lazy with writing letters, most people find it easier to write (and probably more important to send) email. All you need is access to a computer. Extended possibilities to communicate with other Burmese also mean better possibilities to practice the Burmese language.

One of the 22-year-old female students believes that there is a difference between how younger and older Burmese use the internet, and that this difference derives from the need of younger people to keep on to their Burmese identity, as they more easily forget their roots.

> There are two generations of Burmese in exile. You have the older generations like my dad. They use the internet for political stuff. But younger ones like us are not really into politics. So we use other stuff like chat-lines and emails.
>
> *So would you say that social and cultural issues are as important, if not more important, for the younger generation?* Yes, because they have to get adapted to Western culture. The older generation is like real Burmese people deeply rooted in Burmese culture. They think and act like Burmese. But with us it's different. We can't really choose to be Burmese or English, we have to be in the middle.

She continues and says that she values both the information side of the internet and the communication side, as "getting to know other Burmese is good. Otherwise we would never get in touch with each other". To her, it is very important to keep her Burmese identity alive. The older Burmese are so into Burmese culture and values that they hardly will forget their inheritance. Contrary the younger ones need to communicate with other Burmese to maintain their Burmese identity. She possibly exaggerates the importance of the internet, but her points of view are quite upright. She is one of the most active respondents when it comes to using computer mediated communication, and her views are necessarily based on her own experiences. To her communicating with Burmese friends is important, and she would feel a great loss if this possibility was taken away from her.

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[75] Web-sites and possibilities to communicate in other Burmese languages also exist.

For the student above the internet obviously has a very important function when it comes to maintaining a Burmese identity both because she uses it extensively to communicate with other Burmese and to keep up with the developments in Burma. For one of the interviewees the internet only plays a minor role for maintaining a Burmese identity. The 29-year-old male student in question finds the internet much more interesting a as source for information relevant for his studies. Yet he is the exception rather than the rule.

The analysis indicates that the internet extends the modern possibilities to mediate human experience like language, papers and other media have done before. Anthony Giddens' ideas of the modernity and self-identity seem to be further confirmed. The internet makes social relationships independent of specific locales, and mediates human experience (see 4.2.3). Understanding the internet in this context further confirms a view that online relationships and activity need to be seen in relation to offline activity and not as isolated and independent activities. In chapter 4.2.1 I referred to Terje Rasmussen who argues that technology-mediated interaction overlaps with the direct linguistic practises. My analysis further confirms this perspective. According to Giddens mediating experience is nothing new. The internet is a very efficient and convenient way of mediating experience, and furthermore offers opportunities for personal mediating in a way other media cannot provide.

5.5 CONCLUSION

The central aspect of the analysis is that the users decide what to do with the internet and therefore what significance it will have in their lives. The internet and the communication devices it facilitates are potentials, which have to be operated in order to be of any significance. The argument that the internet maintains communities is thus too mechanical. The internet is a device that the Burmese can use to mediate social action and culture. This is also a view much more in accordance with the technological discussion in Chapter IV. When being utilised the internet plays an important role in reproducing and maintaining identity through mediating meaning and knowledge between individuals. It is a device usable for reproducing and maintaining the cultural attributes that are so decisive for the sense of belonging to a social network and for the social actor to maintain her/his social and cultural identity. This way the internet finds it place among other communication devices extending the possibilities of social actors to keep in touch with friends and family. The analysis shows that *context* is the most important aspect of all. It is not possible to

understand the significance of the internet independent of the context of the individual. The Burmese culture with its norms, values and religion is strong enough for most people to maintain their sense of belonging. This became especially clear from the interview with the 25-year-old male student who emphasises that a Burmese unity in great deal depends on living according to the Buddhist doctrine. They *do not need the internet to remain Burmese.* The internet is, again, only a useful device in a situation far from relatives and friends, and in non-Burmese surroundings.

Chapter VI

THE NET AS A POLITICAL TIN-OPENER

THE MAIN purpose of this second analysis-chapter is to explore whether the internet has any political significance for the Burmese. Not all of the respondents are politically active, and fortunately I had the chance to talk to people with different opinions about the Burmese conflict. Most of them are outspoken pro-democracy advocates, but although all of them believe there are serious problems in Burma, three respondents are more careful and do not criticise the military government unconditionally. Some respondents are very politically active whereas others are not very interested in politics (but admit they wish the situation in Burma were better).

I introduce this chapter by analysing how the respondents experience the Burmese state-controlled media. This is an essential background to understand how they perceive the internet and the freedom of expression they experience in the West. I then explore what they think of the internet. This implies an exploration of how the interviewees perceive aspects such as information retrieval, the possibilities to take part in political discussions, whether online information is reliable, and the possibilities to enlighten people. I continue by exploring the claimed democratic nature of computer mediated communication and the internet. This last part of the analysis will be more interpretative and it is grounded on the more descriptive results below.

The analysis in this chapter is in large part based on some of the interviews, and I refer more to a couple of the respondents and not that much to others. Two of the interviewees only have a minor interest in politics, but for both, the social aspects of the internet are truly important. I do not consider this as decreasing the political significance of the internet but assume that this is a pretty normal pattern.

6.1 LIVING WITHOUT FREEDOM OF SPEECH

As should be clear by now the conditions for freedom of speech and assembly are extremely restricted in Burma. The respondents experience living in a Western country as very different from the conditions in Burma. How do the interviewees experience living in

a country where the media are supposed to be free, and how do they experience the differences? Here I will explore what the interviewees think of the Burmese media.

The interviewees emphasise the major differences, although quite a few knew what it was like before they arrived and were thus not very surprised. They emphasise how the government controls all the newspapers and broadcasting services, and that the general public has access neither to the internet nor email. The content of the media in Burma is not very exciting either. A brief look at the state-owned and operated newspaper, *New Light of Myanmar*, tells you that it mostly concerns what ministers met which important persons, the danger Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD present,[76] and perhaps who married and who died the last days.

> It's black and white. In our country, we are not allowed to say what we want, and we are not allowed to write what we want. We are not even allowed to organise more than three or four people. Our human rights are lost and abused. Here the media can write whatever they want. (…) There's a lot of freedom here. That's why it's very different, and I like it a lot. I'm praying for my people have the same freedom (53-year-old male doctor).

In a country where human rights are ignored, where no one is allowed to criticise the government, and where influences from the outside world must be held at a minimum, there are not a lot of interesting stories left to tell. Everything is supposed to appear as normal as possible and people must be inhibited from getting any ideas from what happens in other parts of the world. The military regime has learnt from Eastern Europe, China and North Korea where people have been infused with ideas of individual freedom and democracy:

> The Burmese government won't allow media coverage unless they don't expose any violation of human rights. I don't have a complete picture of what's happening inside Burma. I don't think that Burmese media would cover the Yugoslavia downfall as the Western media did. The Milosovic situation is very similar to the Burmese situation (37-year-old male activist).

The media are not supposed to criticise the government, but rather to give unconditional support for its actions. The result is that some people in the end believe that this is the way things are meant to be. When I asked one of the 22-year-old female students if she believed the government succeeds with their propaganda she answered: "I think so. It is so scary, but I think they succeed in some extent. They keep telling the same stuff over and over again, every day".

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[76] The newspapers in Burma have not criticised Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD in 2001. It is uncertain though whether this is a result of the meetings between the two parts, or if it is just to improve on the relations with other countries critical to the human rights situation in Burma.

Generally the respondents have faith in the Western media system although they are very conscious the importance of being critical to what they read and hear. Some are more critical than others, and find the media inclined to present their speculations as truths. The 27-year-old female student especially feels that the Burma presented in the media and in most web pages is far from the Burma she knows. She admits that the government partly causes this because they are too protective.

> (…) the Burmese government is too closed concerning the media, and people therefore never see the inside. Western media are writing from the outside, and they mainly write about what they think. I want my government to open up a little. Then people will see more. But the government is very protective. (…) I doubt that the journalists actually see an inside. I don't believe they actually face the Burmese people and have interviews. Sometimes they say that we have no rights. But actually you should go and see in Burma. (…) I come from the middle class, and I am far from this.

The extract above is from two different places in the same interview. I combined two quotations, as they illustrate that the respondent is a little ambivalent towards where the problem really is. Is the Burmese case wrongly presented because lazy journalists wish to give the country a bad reputation, or is the problem caused by the military not letting the outside world see the real Burma? An obvious counter-argument is that the military regime is so protective because they have more than a few things to hide.

The internet makes it possible to utilise the freedom to do what neither the Burmese media nor the Western media do: to enlighten people about what is going on in Burma. Whereas traditional printed magazines and newspapers are expensive to produce and to distribute, spreading information on the net is far less expensive. Such an "enlightenment" project is necessarily important in the battle against suppressive state systems. White argues that alternative media offer the possibility to "contribute to the pool of information" and the opportunities to criticise, analyse and participate in the communication process (White 1995). Minority groups like the Burmese therefore have a usable device against the hegemonic symbolic domination of the Burmese state and the Western private marked. My point of departure was exactly a belief that the internet represents a potential that traditional media and communication devices cannot fulfil. I therefore argue that the internet is a valuable apparatus for a dispersed group like the Burmese, since it eases the process of promoting their case in the struggle for democracy in Burma.

6.2 USING THE INTERNET

How are the Burmese using the internet, and does it have any political purpose? I have differentiated this rather descriptive part of the analysis into four sections. I first explore how the respondents value using the internet to distribute information. Then I analyse how the internet makes it easier to keep in touch, participate, co-operate across borders, and how the internet is an effective arena for learning and sharing knowledge. In the third part I investigate how the interviewees trust online information. Lastly, I analyse how using the internet is important to raise people's awareness of the situation in Burma, among both Burmese and non-Burmese.

6.2.1 INFORMATION DISPERSAL AND RETRIEVAL

First of all, and as I have already pointed out, the internet is highly effective for spreading information over huge distances, and it is time-saving, as information travels world-wide in almost no time at all. An efficient and working information structure is utterly important in any struggle for democracy, and especially important for people living in exile or otherwise far from each other. “Yes, when you think like that. With distances and people living dispersed”, the 22-year-old student reasoned, when I asked her if living in exile makes the internet a more important device. She also notes that the internet is world-wide, whereas television and newspapers are more national. The internet therefore appears as valuable for people who live dispersed over the whole world, with little possibility to rely on mass media.

Some respondents work with the internet, either as part of radio broadcasting or in relation to Burma campaigns and information dispersal.

> When we started DVB in 1992, we did not use the internet or email much. Now we use it a lot, and when my computer gets a hang-up, I don't know what to do. (…) We work for the radio, and we depend on news. Without the internet I don't think we can deliver update news to Burma. (…) I don't think we can work without the internet (30-year-old female web-editor).

Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) was founded just before the commercial breakthrough of the internet. During the first years of its existence, the internet as a source of information for those working at the radio became ever more important. During the second half of the nineties with the continual growth of personal computers, its improved price/efficiency ratio, and with the development of continuously better and user-friendlier internet interfaces, the internet became an important source for information also for private

individuals. The net has thus become a very important media channel for DVB, giving them a possibility to reach out to a much wider audience. The respondent above uses the internet a great deal, both work-related and for her personal life. She might thus place more weight to the role of the internet than other people working in the same area. However, there is little doubt that information services like DVB could not exist in the same way as today if they did not use the internet.

Also for smaller groups and for individuals the internet plays a major role in dispersing information. The 37-year-old male activist relies on the internet in his work with Burma campaigns. At the time I did the interview he was working with a campaign against Premier Oil and UK interests in Burma and was looking for relevant information for his web-site. The internet is the prime way to inform people about these advocacy campaigns. The 53-year-old male doctor uses the internet for the same purpose when organising demonstrations.

> I send a lot of email and often inside this country. We used to have demonstrations in front of the Burmese embassy, and I had to organise people and inform them about the demonstration (53-year-old male doctor).

Using the internet also means that the different Burmese organisations have a very efficient device for keeping together and giving each other important feedback. By using the internet the interviewees get the latest news about the situation and recent developments:

> *Why is it so important to reach out to other people as well?* When my friend Rachel Goldwyn was arrested in Burma, I immediately got the message.[77] I have a comrade in Burma, who phoned me half an hour later and told that she was arrested. I sat down by my computer, made a statement and sent it all around the world. And you know, in only 15 minutes everybody knew. It would have cost a lot using a phone. And it would take a lot of time (37-year-old male activist).

I assumed that the internet would be an interesting device for the exile-Burmese and Burmese who for some reason live outside Burma. Not surprisingly the interviewees confirm this impression. Using the internet for information dispersal and retrieval is essential both for individuals and organisations. Not only do people get to know what is happening by checking up different sites. The interviewees told me that they get important information from their online friends as well.

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[77] In September 1999 two British citizens were arrested in Burma for pro-democracy activities. Rachel Goldwyn was arrested by the military police after singing an outlawed revolution song and demanding civil rights in a busy Rangoon market place. This happened just days after British activist James Mawdsley was sentenced to 17 years imprisonment for handing out pro-democracy leaflets. Both are now back in the UK.

> When something happens in Burma, the news spreads really fast to people in exile. The whole world gets the message in no time. (…) We know everything. When I don't show up in Yahoo! Messenger, my friends leave a message and tell me what has happened in Burma the last days (27-year-old female student).

The internet contributes in dispersing information among its users, as information and knowledge is shared between individuals and between organisations or institutions and individuals. One of the interviewees has clearly thought about the fact that Burma and Burmese cannot be expected to make it to the headlines regularly.

> If you live in exile and don't have the internet it's really hard to know what is going in your home country. The Western media don't really care about Burma. Sometimes the media write about Burma: as with Rachel and our leader Aung San Suu Kyi. That's it. But you can find a lot of information about Burma if you have the internet. Like when ILO went to Burma and the statement they made. You can read about it on the internet, but you can't find it on TV or in the mass media. That's the difference (37-year-old male activist).

Like any minority group, exile-Burmese cannot expect traditional mass media to have extensive coverage of their specific case. The internet emerges as a valuable alternative, and White's idea of *the logic of the popular* is illuminated and in part confirmed. Briefly, White claims that new media technologies are often utilised by social movements to disperse alternative versions of both entertainment and political discussions. Even if everybody does not have equal opportunities to participate with their views, the internet is a device exile-Burmese use to offer alternative information about causes and solutions to problems. This should make the Burmese more independent, as they build up networks of resources. I believe White is right when arguing that alternative networks make minority groups more independent.

Throughout the whole project, I have been concerned with making explicit why I find a research about Burmese and the internet especially interesting. I expected that the patterns would not be different from how other people use the internet. I nonetheless asked the respondents whether they believe that Burmese have a different purpose of using the internet. Some did not understand my question, but those who did answered that they believe Burmese might have a different purpose. Burmese are first and foremost interested in Burma and Burmese issues. A few of the interviewees use the internet exclusively for Burma-related issues, and although this does not account for every interviewee, keeping up with Burma clearly is one of the main purposes of using the internet.

> We use it mainly for political things. That's essential and important for us. It's our responsibility to work for our people and our nation. We have to communicate with each other for these political reasons and the democratic activities (53-year-old male doctor).

The doctor is more occupied with Burmese activities than most other Burmese, and I cannot argue that his opinions account for Burmese in general. The level of online and political activity varies to a great extent between the interviewees. Still, most of them emphasise that Burmese people not surprisingly are more interested in getting information about Burma.

> Burmese people might be more interested in Burmese web-sites. (…) Most Burmese people prefer to use a site with more information than regular commercial sites. (…) Various sites provide reasonable and accurate information (25-year-old male student).

Burmese do not use the internet differently from other people in other ways than in what content they are interested in. But this common interest unites the Burmese, which might have some degree of political significance.

6.2.2 PARTICIPATING, KEEPING IN TOUCH, CO-OPERATING AND LEARNING

In Chapter IV I argued that the plural and the participatory democracy models create a fundament for arguments that the internet might have a political significance in the struggle for democracy. This will become clear as I discuss how the interviewees use the internet to participate in debates, and how they use it to keep in touch with companions and for co-operation. In addition, the respondents emphasise the general importance of learning and knowledge, and point to the learning-potentials of using the internet. All of these aspects are vital both in the participatory and the plural democracy models. A brief summary from Chapter IV reminds us that the participatory model emphasises the individual's right and possibility to express her views and meanings, and that taking part in the different spheres of a society is necessary to learn how a democracy works. The plural model focuses on how a population can be divided into groups according to interests and values. These groups work in a socialising way, within which citizens raise their level of awareness. In Chapter IV I claimed that the internet (as well as other media) can be expected to increase people's knowledge about a society. The mediating of information results in increased levels of knowledge among the Burmese. How the respondents use the internet illustrates certain points in the two democracy models.

First of all, Charles Ess (1996) may be right when arguing that information and communication technologies strengthen the different communities internally and independent of time and space, as it provides minority groups the chance to organise and oppose to unacceptable politics (see 4.3.1). The interviews and the research of Burmese sites show that political discussions are important.

> We have two or three e-groups where we discuss and debate what is happening. It's really good and we learn a lot (37-year-old male activist).

Some of the respondents take part in online discussions and debates concerning Burmese issues. This impression is further confirmed by the research I have done of several Burmese web-sites. Both the guest-book in the Free Burma Coalition web-site, and message-boards in different Yahoo! Clubs are frequently used to express points of view and discuss political problems.[78] People use these arenas both to mediate what they believe are important news, and to express their opinions. As people of all kinds and political backgrounds contribute in these discussions, all kinds of perspectives are expressed. Pro-democracy activists do not reign the message boards alone. At the *Dialogue Webpage for Conflicts Worldwide*[79] pure political discussions take place. A contribution from Yoichi Yamaguchi, a former ambassador of Japan to Myanmar, provoked several replies, as he argued that there were major discrepancies between what is happening in Burma and what Western media report. These web-sites thus give people with different opinions a chance to meet and discuss political matters. The same can be seen in different newsgroups concerning Burma. People with highly different opinions concerning the political situation in Burma post their private opinions, articles from newspapers, international news agencies and organisations or reply to earlier messages.[80]

Private discussions and debates like the ones the 37-year-old above has with his companions, combined with several active and living web-sites imply that Burmese appreciate the possibility to take part in political debates and use the opportunity the internet offers to express own points of views.[81] This is however not the case for all of the respondents. One student does not like to talk much about politics at all. Her other online friends have their debates, but she prefers not to take part.

> I don't want to talk about politics, but it doesn't mean that I'm not interested in politics or that I don't understand politics. (…) But I don't like to criticise our country for what is happening. I don't think these political conversations should be so criticising. *You feel that talking about politics should be about encouraging and finding solutions?* Yes, yes (27-year-old female student).

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[78] Free Burma Coalition: http://www.freeburmacoalition.org/frames/home.htm [08-03-2001]
One of the many Burmese Yahoo! Clubs: http://clubs.yahoo.com/clubs/myanmarburmese [08-03-2001]
[79] http://www.dwcw.org/cgi/wwwbbs.cgi?Myanmar [08-03-2001]
[80] Before the web and web-browsers, online communication largely meant posting messages on electronic bulletin boards. These boards were later called newsgroups. Today there exist thousands of groups covering almost any kind of subject. One of the most commonly used concerning Burma is alt.soc.culture.burma.
[81] Burmese people are of course not the only ones who express their meanings in these arenas, but they are clearly the major contributors.

The interviewee prefers the social sides of the internet in addition to the possibilities to find relevant information. She does not care too much about politics. In all, based on the interviews and on research of several Burmese sites, the possibilities offered by the internet for communication and information are important, as they contribute to creating more awareness of what is going on and clarifying different meanings about these happenings and their causes. The internet might in fact secure a greater freedom of expression, assuring increased pluralism in content and opinion.

As emphasised earlier keeping in touch with friends and family is one of the aspects the interviewees call attention to as the most significant. The same is obviously true for keeping in touch with colleges, making co-operation across borders more convenient.

> I keep in touch with other student activists. I organise a student network in UK. (…) And I try to create a Free Burma group in each university in UK. We keep in touch via email. They can get information from our web-site. I also keep in touch with the people at the Thai-Burma border. (…) I keep contact with Burmese and non-Burmese groups and try to launch different campaigns (37-years-old male activist).

There are several networks of this kind, and participating in these communities can, following a participatory understanding, contribute as arenas where meanings and opinions are created on the basis of the exchanges of views and information that take place. These networks clearly contribute to raising the participants' level of awareness and political competence (see 4.3.1). Keeping in touch with colleges is a prerequisite for co-operation among people who are geographically dispersed. The 53-year-old male doctor for instance says that he uses the internet to collaborate with his colleges abroad, most of them located in Thailand, India, Australia, the US, and in Japan. The internet is thus used to keep the political networks alive and active. These networks are not totally dependent of the internet, but it brings with it a number of important advantages that make it easier to keep the activity alive.

The opportunities to participate in these networks imply a certain degree of democratisation *of* the media, as more people get the chance to participate with their views (see Lindblad in 4.3.2). This is so despite the lack of an all-public access to the internet. The opportunities for smaller groups of people to express their views and discuss matters on their own premises are considerably improved as compared to a situation where these possibilities do not exist. The empirical material further exposes these advantages. Both the interviews and my research of Burmese online sites indicate that the Burmese use the net to present alternative versions of the conflict based on their own premises.

The interviewees emphasise the importance of knowledge in any social development and acknowledge that there are considerably learning-potentials with using the internet. They are generally very concerned with the closing down of universities in Burma and what consequences this might have for a future democratic development in Burma.

> Only a few people have finished university in Burma, and therefore a lot of people don't have education. This makes it very difficult to set up the country again (29-year-old male student).

No matter how different views the interviewees have concerning the political situation in Burma, they are all very sceptical towards the closing down of universities. They emphasise how important knowledge is for any country's future, and several respondents want to go back to Burma when the situation there is different, and do something for their country.

> *So you believe that education and information is important?* It is most important for a nation and for democracy. It is especially important for Burmese people. They are suffering, and they are ignorant. Education and communication are therefore very important for a democratic development in Burma (53-year-old male doctor).

The 25-year-old male student is of the same opinion as the doctor above, and told me how Burma once was a promising country where education and knowledge were highly acclaimed. He claims that four decades under a military regime has made many Burmese less politically aware and conscious. According to the student, serious political "enlightenment" is therefore essential for a future development in Burma. In a greater degree than the other respondents he emphasises the importance of Buddhism also when it comes to enlightening people:

> We don't have separated good and evil forces in Buddha's teaching. There is only a degree of ignorance. To be evil is to be totally ignorant. But there is a connection between wholesome and unwholesome things. They are not separated entities. Trying to achieve democracy should imply getting rid of ignorance. It is what we might call a political getting awareness (25-year-old male student).

The significance of Buddhism in the context of the thesis can hardly be exaggerated, and should have been emphasised more in the interviews. This student stresses the importance of Buddhism more than the other respondents do, but it certainly has a function both socially and politically. It seems too secular and not very appropriate to bring the subject of internet into this context. Nevertheless, even the Buddhist-centred interviewee above acknowledges that he uses the internet to follow up on Buddha's teachings. The interview with the 42-year-old monk further confirms the impression that the internet might have a

religious purpose as well, as some people also use the internet to find out more about Buddhism and to communicate with other Buddhists.

In 6.2.1 I accentuated the importance of information retrieval and dispersal. In this sub-chapter I have underscored how keeping in touch, communicating and participating in the existing networks is important for my interviewees. The internet can thus be said to have a significant value as a learning device. The 30-year-old female web-editor finds the idea of the internet as an important learning device appealing and even argues that learning from the internet can be almost as good as attending a university. Information and knowledge still comprise the backbone of any enlightenment or development project and increase the political awareness among people, and information and communication technologies do seem to strengthen the Burmese communities internally.

6.2.3 TRUSTING INFORMATION ON THE NET

Apart from some negligible problems finding exactly what they want, my respondents seem to agree that the abundance of information offered by the internet is beneficial in their situation. The internet seems to have a vital function in the process of circulating information and symbolic content among the Burmese who use the internet. There is, however, one problematic aspect worth paying attention to, and illuminated by the respondents. Do they trust the sources and the information they find, and how do they decide what is reliable and what is not? Some of the interviewees think it is funny how the media in Britain interview the Prime Minister and ask him all sorts of questions, and almost unbelievable that the media can make uninhibited fun of Royal family members. The differences between the media system in Burma and in the UK or Norway are huge and probably quite hard to grasp. I expected the Burmese to have experienced these differences between the Burmese media system and the Western system as substantial. Obviously, they mention this. What surprises me is how they all seem to have adapted to the new system very quickly, and they have made considerable reflections on how to read, interpret and compare information and sources on the net. Although the interviewees agree that the internet is a valuable source of information, they emphasise that they do not believe everything unconditionally. Some are very sceptical to what they read, and show little faith in the most popular pro-democracy Burmese sites. As the 27-year-old female student says:

> I believe that the information describing the Burma-situation on the internet, is extremely exaggerated. The Burma-sites present extremely negative point of views. I

> know that there is one web-site for the official Myanmar: myanmar.com. This is an extreme other side. Sometimes I make a joke: if you combine these two sources and divide them by two you get the truth. I like the internet a lot and find it very entertaining. But the information about Burma, honestly, I never believe it completely.

Her perspective must be understood in accordance with her background from Burma. She is from the middle class in Burma and has never experienced any problems with the very tight conditions of the military regime. Her most significant problem caused by the government is the closing down of the universities, and she is now in London to finish her studies. She is not blind to the problems caused by the strict government, but neither does she recognise the picture of Burma painted in these web pages. Her advice is to read the different sources and compare them. The truth is somewhere between them. On the other hand the 27-year-old student has much more faith in the CNN and BBC-pages: "CNN is like the whole world point of view". She believes they are not as biased as the activist-sites.

Other respondents are more outspoken democracy advocates, but nonetheless stress the necessity of comparing different sources. They agree on the importance of not relying on one source. The views of the middle class student above do not differ dramatically from those of the 37-year-old political activist or the 52-year-old doctor. They agree that in order to get closer the truth, it is necessary to compare information from different sites and preferably also with other media-channels.

> On the internet you get the information, and you can find out what is right or what is wrong. Nobody tells you how to use it. There is a lot of news on the internet, and you can compare with a different source (37-year-old political activist).

The interviewees are very conscious the importance of encountering different views before making up their minds. The three respondents from DVB all emphasise that they never trust anything before they have confirmed it with other sources. A radio-station has to make sure that what they broadcast is in fact reliable information in order to maintain their reputation as a serious media-channel, and as such it is not surprising that the respondents from DVB emphasise the importance of checking up on news-stories.[82] More unanticipated though, is the impression that most of the interviewees are very concerned with checking up on stories and comparing different sources. Several interviewees explicitly underline the

[82] Still a few of the interviewees say that they do not always trust information from DVB as they feel they represent a too biased perspective when compared to BBC or CNN. This might be so, and is possibly a consequence of DVB not having the same responsibilities to major institutions like Burmese departments in BBC or CNN. Based on White, one can argue that DVB is more of an alternative media channel, which means they present alternative points of views and other versions of the same story.

necessity of an active interpretation in the information retrieval process. “We have to use our brain to decide what is real and what is wrong” (27-years-old female student) and “You have to use your intelligence to filter out which is reasonable to believe” (25-year-old male student) are only two citations supporting this impression.

By comparing different sources, the respondents feel they receive balanced impressions of what is really happening. The 25-year-old male student furthermore says that with information that does not affect him, he does not really care whether it is true or not. If, on the other hand, the information is important for him, he is very careful not to solely rely on the internet. “There are other sources as well. Then I can decide if the information is correct or not”. Nobody automatically believes what they find on the net, what they hear on TV or radio, or what they read in newspapers. They are aware that media in the West tend to exaggerate things: “they try to make the papers interesting, and in order to do that, they have to exaggerate” (22-year-old female student). The respondents are very aware that this is the case for information on the internet as well:

> The internet is indispensable to propaganda. You can use it in the fight for freedom. But it depends on how you use it. And who use it. But I think everyone use it for propaganda. Propaganda for good and propaganda for bad (25-year-old male student).

It is not very surprising that the three respondents from DVB are so concerned with confirming the reliability of the information they receive. It is more difficult, however, to explain why the other Burmese interviewees are so concerned with comparing and checking up on sources. Still, the 37-year-old political activist gives clear indications of why Burmese appreciate a plurality of views and perspectives. “In Burma you can hear only one voice. Here everybody’s talking differently and you can think for yourself”. The overall picture emerging from the empirical data shows that the respondents are critical, and that they do not unconditionally trust any source or media-channel. The explicit awareness of the uncertainty of any perspective and the necessity of an active interpretation indicate that the interviewees have a very well developed critical literacy. Enebakk et al. claim that the recipients need a *communicative competence*, which means they have to be able to interpret and filter information with regard to quality and relevance (Enebakk et al. 1999: 108). The qualitative aspects of the information and communication processes are important, and more information does not automatically mean better and more rational decisions. The respondents’ different cultural and social backgrounds seem to have minor significance for how they understand information in media generally and the

internet specifically, and they generally show a well-developed critical literacy and communicative competence when it comes to information retrieval on the internet.

6.2.4 RAISING AWARENESS

Using the internet to spread information and knowledge about Burma is also about raising awareness among the general public. This is conceived as very important to urge political change in Burma. The 30-year-old male technician argues that DVB is a source other broadcast services use. He refers to how BBC often uses headlines from the radio-station. This, he continues, is important as DVB reaches out to Burmese people. BBC on the other hand, reaches out to a much larger audience. Hence DVB and the internet seem to have a mediating function towards a bigger audience. Other respondents argue in a same manner, but might possibly exaggerate the importance of the internet as a source that can enlighten people in general about the situation in Burma. For instance, one of the 22-year-old female students says: "With the internet the whole world can learn what's happening in Burma. Our voices can be heard". Certainly the whole world can learn what is happening in Burma by using the many information resources that exist online. However the world will have to want to learn what is happening in Burma in order to learn anything. The crucial point is that the internet is a medium that in a greater degree demands an active user looking for specific information. The vast amounts of information on the net make attention a scarce resource. One respondent said that Burmese hunger for information, as they come from a country where relevant and varied information is non-existent. Contrary web-sites (or those who organise a web-site) hunger for attention. Still the existence of the internet is important to raise people's awareness of the political situation in Burma. Primarily as the internet makes information which otherwise would be more difficult to find, available and easily accessible. There are also several examples of very popular web-sites on the net, which are not the products of big and wealthy companies. David Gauntlett (2000) argues that "individuals and small groups are relatively empowered in this medium, because if they produce a website deserving of attention then, hopefully and ideally, word will spread around the internet (…)".[83] Since producing good and functional web-sites is not necessarily a question of having the best resources, the internet represent a valuable alternative for the Burmese.

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[83] David Gauntlett (2000): http://www.newmediastudies.com/webbook1.htm [11-01-2001]

Both those working at DVB and the 37-year-old male activist have personal experiences with how using the internet is valuable in the quest of raising awareness among people. They emphasise that the situation would be quite different without these possibilities to disperse and retrieve information and to keep in touch via computer mediated communication. These are explicit experiences implying that the internet indeed is a valuable device, which can be used to make a difference. Hence I emphasise their experiences as important for the argument that the internet might have a significant political importance.

6.3 A democratising tool

In the first part of this analysis I have argued that the internet provides the Burmese (or any other minority group in a specific society) alternative information and communication arenas that make the Burmese more independent of existing media structures. I have seen these enhanced opportunities for information and communication in relation to relevant democracy models, emphasising the importance of active participation and knowledge. In the remainder of this chapter I will present a more interpretative analysis discussing whether and in what ways the internet can be said to be a democratising medium. In Chapter IV, I referred to Janet Wasco (1992), who ask whether information technologies enhance democratic communication, and how these resources are enhancing or inhibiting democratic progressive movements devoted to social change. These questions will in part be guiding for the following analysis.

6.3.1 A DEMOCRATIC TOOL

Thinking of the internet as a democratic tool implies that it is characterised by the processes Lindblad calls democratisation *of* and *through* the medium (see 4.3.2). Originally Lindblad discusses the possibilities of local radio and television to democratise communication and argues that this requires that people have access to the media and that a democratic communication eventually should lead to social changes (Hagen 1992: 23). I use Lindblad's concepts only to guide the analysis. I have already argued in depth that the internet gives the Burmese a possibility to take part in a process of mediating communication contributing to a sphere in which knowledge is shared and opinion is formed. This should be clear from the analysis above, although everybody does not take part in this process. It is far more difficult to give any tentative answers to whether the situation in Burma can be improved through the use of the internet. Whatever the case may

be, the internet is only a device whose potentials have to be fulfilled by people using it actively.

Any potential social change caused by people using the internet can be understood as a result of what Bennett calls *the witness role* and the *reifying role* of the media, or in this case, the internet (see 4.3). Changes are fuelled by the flow of political impressions. Within the Burmese context, the internet can arguably have such functions. The internet has a clear witness function, as it clarifies for both rulers and ruled what is going on and who is doing what (I get back to this in 6.3.4). Second the internet has a reifying role, as the Burmese activists get external confirmation on their values through taking part in online networks. This is evidently an important function of the communication processes that take place between the dispersed groups of people working for changes in Burma.

The respondents do not solely value getting information about the Burmese situation, but emphasise that following up on happenings other places in the world is important.

> *So what is happening in Yugoslavia has given you hope?* Yes. And what's happening in Indonesia is very encouraging too. We hope for our future. We have to encourage and tell people about other countries (36-year-old male reporter).

The recent developments in Kosovo and North Korea show people that change is possible and can therefore be essential for people to keep their faith in political improvements in Burma as well. Learning from political developments other places in the world might be essential for keeping the faith in future changes in Burma. Free speech and information retrieval can thus change people's expectations and with Andrew Shapiro's words, give individuals a new sense of what is possible.

Based on the data from the interviews I do not have grounds to argue whether the Burmese online activity can be viewed as a kind of public sphere. What has become clear, though, is that for some interviewees the internet evidently plays an important role in this respect. The interviews also indicate that White's *logic of the popular* may in part explain a function the internet may have for the Burmese. The many Burmese web-sites are a result of people having enhanced opportunities to take part in essential communication and information processes, and these possibilities create other versions of the truth.

I do not pursue a belief in the internet as an ideally functioning public sphere, but I think it is interesting to understand the empirical evidence according to James Slevin's idea of a mediated publicness and space of the visible. Slevin's argument from Chapter IV concerned how the internet contributes to a *space of the visible* constituted by actions and

events that through processes of symbolic exchange have been made visible for the public. In the context of the Burmese this implies that the internet makes information and communication processes more visible. Burmese gather and acquire information from several different sources in online non-localised spaces. The idea of the mediated publicness becomes relevant with regard to the Burmese, as the internet (as other media channels) detaches the visibility of actions and events from the sharing of a common locale. The empirical evidence supports the impression that dispersed groups like exile-Burmese gain from such a visible, deliberative mediated publicness. The information dispersal/retrieval and the mediated communication that takes place between the Burmese indicate that meanings, opinions and information expressed at one locale is received by a plurality of non-present others. In a deliberative manner the respondents show how they encounter different views, which contribute to their understanding of what is going on. Hence reasoned judgements are formed on the basis of mediated information and communication.

The analysis in 6.2 confirms that the interviewees do not always take part in active discussions, but the internet has an evident political role in that the respondents get the information they need. The fact that they almost without exceptions use several different sources and compare what these say supports the argument that the internet helps the interviewees form reasonable judgements.

6.3.2 EMPOWERED INDIVIDUALS

One of my prime assumptions when I started this project was that the internet changes the balance between who governs information and communication processes, giving individuals and small networks more power and influence with their own information horizons. As became evident in 4.3.3, Andrew Shapiro supports this assumption, and argues that the internet gives us an opportunity to take command and control of our interactions with the world, and that this access to personalised information changes the individual's perception of the world.

The analysis from 6.2 indicates that at least in part these assumptions and arguments are confirmed. Instead of having to rely on mass media's general and over-all picture of the world, the interviewees say they actively seek the information they want. Only a few respondents feel that the chaotic structure of the net sometimes is a problem, and even these few respondents rather emphasise the availability of information online. Especially when they compare the internet with mass media, the hypothesis that the

internet empowers the individual is supported. In 5.2.1 I referred to the 37-year-old political activist who argued that with the mass media you only get what they want to give you whereas with the internet you are free to find information on whatever subject you like. His citation directly supports Shapiro's arguments. The analysis in 5.2.1 indicates that the internet gives you what you want, when you want it, and that it has some major advantages that mass media do not have. Rather than repeating the arguments from 5.2.1 any further, I will now continue the discussion whether there are any unfortunate consequences of these possibilities to acquire the information you want. Shapiro considers this selective information retrieval process harmful if the results are self-imposed ignorant and narrow-minded people who avoid dissonant information that is not in accordance with own points of view or interests.

In Chapter IV I also mentioned Lars Qvortrup's ideas of the hypercomplex society. Qvortrup might exaggerate the complexity of the modern society, but he is useful to illuminate the necessity of a well-developed critical literacy and a high level of knowledge to handle the complexity of information and communication processes. With regard to the interviewees the interesting questions concern how they filter information to get what they want, whether the possibilities the internet offers make them ignorant and isolated from other happenings, and if they critically interpret the information they acquire. I have already given a positive answer to the last question. The respondents are surprisingly critical and aware of the doubtful nature of much online information. The interviews further indicate that the Burmese to an extensive degree use the internet very selectively to find information concerning Burma. Especially those who are engaged with pro-democracy activity are very Burma-selective in their search for information and recent news: "We fight for democracy in Burma. Therefore almost all use of the internet is related to Burma" (36-years-old male reporter). Another respondent claims 95% of his internet use is about Burma. This is however not typical for all of the interviewees. The students use the internet to find relevant information for their studies, and several respondents use the internet to keep up with general news. Most of the respondents are not solely interested in Burmese issues but wants to be informed about other news as well.

> Mostly I watch BBC and CNN. I don't read Norwegian newspapers, and I almost feel blind. I don't know what is happening here. We use internet and watch BBC, CNN or Sky News. (…) We have to know what happens other places too (30-year-old male technician).

This quotation illustrates that mass media are significant for general information. The respondents can be divided into two groups. One that is not specifically interested in

politics, whether Burma or any other place, and a second group consisting of people interested in both Burmese and non-Burmese politics. Whereas mass media are useful for information about the general conditions in the world, the internet is specifically useful to learn about the Burmese situation.

The respondents are part of several communities and relations, and I doubt that their selective use of the internet flattens their perspectives on the world. Rather, using online resources expands their perspectives on the situation in Burma. This impression is further solidified by how critically aware the respondents seem to be when it comes to confirming information and sources. They encounter different views about the Burmese conflict, and they give the impression of being concerned with other things besides Burma.

6.3.3 KNOWING YOUR ENEMY

The analysis has in large part been following and confirming assumptions from the theoretical chapter. This is caused by a number of reasons. Firstly, my assumptions have been very modest and based on a thorough theoretical basis. Secondly, I believe I could have been more critical in my search for information that does not confirm my assumptions. However, there are several results that I did not anticipate. The manifest importance of the witness role of the internet did, for example, surprise me. In chapter 4.3 I referred to W. Lance Bennett who argues that the media may have an important role for political developments and reforms, as they create small openings for reforms. The empirical data from the interviews are in a great extent in line with what he argues. The interviewees emphasise the importance of knowing your enemy and that the internet has a crucial role in this respect. The interviews illustrate that the witness role of the internet goes both ways, as the internet makes it easy for all sides of the conflict to follow up on each other's thoughts and doings.

> I read material from SPDC. I try to read the daily pieces from *New Light of Myanmar*. That's to know what's going on, what's their propaganda, what are their aims and so on. Whether you believe or not is your decision. We know who are behind the information. I read just to know what they are up to (30-year-old female web-editor).

The web-editor is not alone in finding information-services from the military regime useful and valuable. It does not matter that the information is biased and from the military's points of views. The 53-year-old doctor argues:

> The military regime has a web-site. This way we get to know what they do, what they believe, and what they are going to do. Even our enemy uses the internet. We get what we want. We can trust their mind, what they intend to do, and what they are going to do.

Carefully following what the military is up to or what they say they are up to gives indications to how and what they think of the political situation. The respondents clearly get a lot back from reading between the lines. For instance the continuos critic of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD indicates that the military regime considers the political opposition a threat that has to be prevented. A brief look at the official Myanmar homepage[84] tells you a lot about the impression the military regime wants to give to the outside world. The main purpose of these pages is to present Myanmar as a peaceful country in harmony and with ethnical and religious diversity. Further, much effort is done to give extensive counter-arguments against any critique of the political situation and the human rights situation. A most illustrative example is a document called *The Truth,* which is sub-titled, *An analysis of the announcements issued by the National League for Democracy:*[85]

> Most of the facts of the NLD announcements are found to be based, not on actual incidents after systematic inquiry, but on rumours and reports of some NLD members. The NLD is issuing such random announcements with no credibility. It sends these false reports to foreign governments through foreign embassies as well as to the world at large via powerful broadcasting stations. As a result, the Government's admirable and noteworthy endeavours for developing the country have been greatly misunderstood by governments and the people of some nations, and our country has been wrongly assumed to be a nation with poor human rights norms and practices (*The Truth,* Vol. 1: 1).

I cite this paragraph in its full length, as it illuminates the effort the military regime puts in improving on their credibility. The paper aims at disclaiming all critical accusations of what is happening in Burma by presenting the alleged true versions of the situations.

The witness role function goes both ways. The 53-year-old male doctor calls the situation a game where both parties do what they have to do. The military intelligence uses the internet to watch the pro-democracy activists, and the activists keep an eye on the military regime. Thinking about the dynamic online activity among the pro-democracy groups, I asked the doctor whether this might make the military government a bit insecure.

> Yes, I think that's why they are very insecure, they are very paranoid, and they are very frustrated. They are infamous and notorious in the international community. They see what we do, and we see what they do. It's a bargain.

I believe the doctor is right in his assumption, and the extract above indicates that the military authorities consider the internet as an important arena for mediating culture and politics. The internet makes information and communication structures and their content

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[84] www.myanmar.com [14-03-2001]

open for all parties. It is difficult to say what these conditions mean for a potential democratic development, but it is likely that the present media situation with the internet as a part of the picture, do influence the government in Burma. They certainly know what their reputation is like in other countries, and they might at one point admit that the only way to improve this reputation is to admit some serious political changes.[86]

The transparency of the net does however have some unfortunate consequences as well. Some respondents say they always feel a bit insecure when using the internet due to the military surveillance of most Burmese web-sites. Using anonymous names in open settings and more importantly, following certain rules of precautions is common. Especially sending emails concerning sensitive matters is not recommended.

> They can get information through the internet. We can't trust email. They can tap. That's why we use a security system. We have a key that makes sure other people can't read our email. This is for important information. With normal email it's fine (37-year-old male activist).

This interviewee is more bothered by the military intelligence than most of the other respondents. He claims his phone is tapped and also tells how someone recently sent him and three other Burmese activists a virus attached to an email. These circumstances causes him to take care, as the military regime obviously knows about him. The politically active respondents all take their precautions because of the transparent nature of the net and the military intelligence. The insecurity is not on a personal level though. All respondents feel personal messages and individual, private conversations are perfectly safe.

6.4 Conclusion

The internet has a clear political significance for the Burmese. My main assumptions have been confirmed. I have found that the respondents value the internet as a device that is usable for dispersing and retrieving information and for communicating about Burma-related issues. Conquering geographical distance, different time zones, and the insignificant cost of using the internet are major advantages mass media and other communication devices cannot match. The characteristics of the internet are especially valuable for minority groups like the Burmese. The internet is thus empowering those who struggle for democracy in Burma.

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[85] http://www.myanmar-information.net/truth/truth.html [14-03-2001]

[86] In February and March 2001, BurmaNet, DVB and most other news-services have brought news concerning a dialogue between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi/NLD and SPDC. Details from the talks are not known.

On the other hand it is easy to exaggerate the democratic potentials of the internet. I believe these online networks and information and communication resources might be perceived by its users as more important than they really are. It is crucial not to loose sight of all those who do not know anything about what is going on in these online communities. Nonetheless the political significance of online networks is more far-reaching than to only concern its users. I base this argument on the relationships between the online and offline Burmese communities. The information- and communication processes online and offline are connected, and what goes on online will be further dispersed among people offline.[87]

[87] A very different example from UNDP might illustrate this point. Farmers in rural Bolivia have indirect access to the internet, as "farmers with crop concerns can give questions to the community leader, who relays this inquiry to the radio station, where it is sent to UNDP's communications centre. The question is then posted on the internet and answers received are emailed back to the radio station and broadcast" (UNDP 1999: 65).

Chapter VII

A CRITICAL VIEW ON THE INQUIRY

> A panoply of electronic devices puts at everyone's hand capacities far beyond anything that the printing press could offer. Machines that think, that bring great libraries into anybody's study, that allow discourse among persons a half-world apart, are expanders of human culture. They allow people to do anything that could be done with the communication tools of the past, and many more things (de Sola Pool 1995: 339).

ITHIEL DE SOLA POOL'S point eighteen years ago was that computers, like the printing press, the telephone, and the modern mass media, may be utilised as technologies of freedom. The wrong policy is the only thing that can threaten this freedom. When communication technologies are secured a least possible regulation there will be more freedom to socialise with "anyone, anywhere with whom one finds affinity", and patterns of human interaction will thus change (ibid. 342). These are simple consequences of communication technologies. Panegyric descriptions of the potentials of the information society, and for social interaction in cyber-space and "virtual communities" tend to focus on the differences between new communication- and information technologies and the past (Negroponte 1995, Rheingold 1993, Turkle 1997). Even if new communication technologies represent new possibilities, the continuity to the past seems to be more evident. The Burmese in this study use the internet like they use other media and communication technologies. The difference is that they now have better and more extensive possibilities for information retrieval, dispersal and for communication.

As for the research questions, the Burmese interviewees appreciate the possibilities the internet offers for information retrieval and communication. The analysis further illustrates that *how* they value it in great extent is related to *why* they value it. It also seems clear that the Burmese use the internet to maintain their social, cultural, and political relationships, and that it has a certain degree of political significance. The analysis has illustrated that the second of the initial research questions is too mechanical, as I asked how the internet contributes to maintaining communities among the Burmese. Social and democratic functions are only potentials that the individuals using the technology must exploit. The analysis shows that the community-maintaining function of the internet depends on strong cultural and political fundaments indicating that individuals who are

concerned with Burmese culture and society are more concerned with Burma online as well. The importance of context and the connections between online and offline can hardly be exaggerated.

7.1 ANTICIPATING SPECIFIC RESULTS

A researcher who anticipates certain results may consciously or unconsciously look for specific literature and theory in accordance with her/his expectations. This problem has been highlighted several times in the inquiry. I have explicitly stated that although I expected certain patterns, I would not consciously look up precisely the literature that supported these expectations. Still, in some extent this is what seems to be the result when the analysis is done. My expectations are to a great extent supported.[88]

First of all, this is the result of very general research questions to begin with. In the process of mapping existing literature, these research questions were decisive for what I found relevant. I further anticipated certain patterns based on the theoretical propositions. The empirical evidence (both the interviews and the unstructured research of online documents) were then compared with these anticipated patterns. The analysis has apparently followed the method outlined in Chapter III. The problem is that there are several different theories and several interesting aspects that could have deserved a thorough discussion, but which were not included. Robert K. Yin (1994) emphasises that the case-study researcher must have a good theoretical fundament before collecting the empirical data. Hence the challenge is to get a good overview of the relevant literature.

The critical points are thus the theory used and the respondents interviewed. The respondents are all quite well-educated, and the fact that they seem to have so few problems with finding the information they want, and that they seem to have a fundamental critical literacy does not indicate that this accounts for Burmese in general. Other respondents could clearly give very different results. Unfortunately, finding respondents at all was not an easy task, and I could not limit my possibilities any further by in addition look for specific types of respondents. As outlined in Chapter III, statistical generalisations are not the purpose of case studies. The goal is to explore whether the empirical material could add anything to the theoretical models and patterns. This goal has in a great extent been fulfilled in this inquiry. The interesting question that emerges when the analysis is

[88] There are certain results from the analysis, which I did not fully anticipate. I will not repeat all of the findings in this chapter, as the results should be quite clear from the above analysis.

done is what findings other relevant theoretical models would have given. In this last chapter I will therefore suggest relevant problematic aspect that could have been connected to the research questions and the analysis. I discuss how the somewhat optimistic understanding of new information- and communication technologies on which this thesis is grounded might be questioned, how the discussion about knowledge gaps might have some relevance in relation to the internet, and I discuss how the concept of community might have been too uncritically used.

7.2 QUESTIONING THE POTENTIALS OF THE INTERNET: A SOCIAL EQUALISER?

Flis Henwood, Sally Wyatt et al. (2000) point to two contradictory claims made for the "information society". There is the emancipatory potential of the greater availability of information and communication technologies, but there are also warnings about the threat to individual liberty and social cohesion (Henwood, Wyatt et al. 2000: 13). The similarities of the first of these claims and this analysis are evident. Although critical to many of the mid-nineties tributes to the information revolution, the fundamental understanding of the internet in this thesis is optimistic, focusing on the improved potentials for communication and information retrieval. These potentials are still for the few, as the 1999-report from UNDP illustrates.

> Within each region it is only the tip of each society that has stepped into the global loop – worldwide, just 2% of all people. What sets these people apart from the rest? Current access to the Internet runs along the fault lines of national societies, dividing educated from illiterate, men from women, rich from poor, young from old, urban from rural (UNDP 1999: 62).

The unequal distribution of new communication technologies globally and between individuals has not been discussed in any depth in the thesis. However there are so many problematic aspects concerning the many precautions to the potentials of the internet that some of these questions should be discussed. Even if telecommunications are accessible to people, they will have little access to network societies without literacy and basic computer skills. The respondents evidently are computer literate, which is probably why they value the internet as they do. Graham Thomas and Sally Wyatt (2000) are concerned with "the digital divide" reflecting the pattern of who the netizens are according to the 1999 report from UNDP. They emphasise that lack of access is not the only problem, as using the

internet effectively requires specific skills. They argue that there might be a problem of non-use, that is people who do not use the internet because it is difficult or too expensive.

Lack of access and lack of the specific skills necessary for an efficient use of the internet bring two related problems up for discussion. First, the divide between haves and have-nots may result in a divide between knows and know-nots. This aspect relates to the simple consequences of not having the same information resources as others and is hence caused by disadvantages and inequality. Second, the knowledge gap hypothesis might be relevant in the context of the internet as well. According to Denis McQuail (1994) there are two main aspects to this hypothesis. The first aspect concerns the general distribution of aggregate information between social classes, the other relates to the specific subjects or topics on which some are better informed than others (McQuail 1994: 358). The hypothesis posits that those with higher education and socio-economic status process information more efficiently. Hence, an increased amount of information results in widening the relative information gap between information rich and information poor.

Both of these aspects could clearly be relevant in a discussion concerning the Burmese and their use of the internet. The question is whether the respondents are part of an information elite with access to the internet and knowledge of how to use it efficiently. There are other connected aspects to this question. A qualitative understanding of information and communication has been emphasised throughout the thesis. Information and communication are argued to be a fundament for any community to evolve, as the participants are involved in a mediation of culture and symbolic forms. Are the Burmese interviewees thus part of both an information and cultural elite with better possibilities to maintain their sense of belonging to a Burmese community? And could this potentially result in a social gap between Burmese who know how to take advantage of the information and communication technologies and those who either do not have access to or do not know how to use the internet efficiently? My empirical material is not sufficient to be used in any analytical generalisation to improve such hypotheses. Discussions of this kind easily become too focused on the technological side. In any discussion of knowledge- and social gaps, the researcher will have to pay attention to the context. The importance of context and the relation between online and offline would indicate that the information and communication processes that take place online cannot be seen isolated from the offline context of which they are a part. Nonetheless, a discussion of potential knowledge- and social gaps could have been worthwhile presupposed a contextual approach.

7.3 INDIRECT OR MEDIATED RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITIES

Another aspect that could be criticised in this inquiry is to what extent online relationships can be considered as communities. I have given a thorough explanation of how I understand communities, and how they depend on the exchange of symbolic forms. Throughout the thesis community is used almost interchangeably with *networks* and *human associations*. Since the respondents communicate with people they knew on beforehand and use the net to maintain these relationships, the networks are considered as some kind of communities. However, some relations are between people who have never met in-person. Can these relationships still be understood as part of online *communities*? Or are they merely indirect relationships assumed to signify more than they actually do? The importance of maintaining communities is one of the prime focuses of the thesis, and hence a further explanation of why the thesis does not follow a particularly strict comprehension of the concept is essential. I will therefore discuss and compare indirect or mediated relationships, and further see how these relationships relate to communities, whether real, pseudo or imagined.

Craig Calhoun differentiates between direct interpersonal relationships characterised by actual or potential face-to-face interaction and indirect imagined personal relationships through some kind of medium (Calhoun 1991: 97-100).[89] He further argues that modern political and economic affairs are distinguished by an increasing amount of indirect social relationships (ibid. 102). This does not, however, mean that direct relationships have become less important, only that they no longer are constitutive of societies. Calhoun emphasises that true communities require face-to-face direct interpersonal relationships. This requirement alone seems to make online communities an impossible phenomena. I will thus discuss the concepts and comprehension of Calhoun to explain why I do not consider his perspective to undermine the use of community in this inquiry.

To Calhoun the primacy of face-to-face situations is a necessary aspect of communities. He refers to Webber (1967), who introduced the notion of community without propinquity for relationships formed within special purpose associations and often mediated by space-transcending communication technology (Calhoun 1991: 102-103).

[89] He actually differentiates between four types of relations but the last two are not relevant in this context.

Calhoun, on the other hand, does not believe that such "supra-local special purpose associations" are communities in a real sense.

> People without direct interpersonal relations with each other are led by the mediation of the world of political symbols to imagine themselves as members of communities defined by common ascriptive characteristics, personal tastes, habits and concerns. These are understood at least sometimes as communities because of the strong sense of fellow-feeling, common interest, and shared identity. But at the same time, they are crucially imagined because of their differences from local communities and others based on direct interpersonal relationships (Calhoun 1991: 108).

People in modern societies develop categorical identities to recognise their interdependence according to nationality, ethnicity, religion or other characteristics. These categorical identities are sometimes imagined on analogy to local communities (ibid. 107). However, as these identities are not formed out of direct relationships among their members, they are not communities. Calhoun recognises that these relations are real enough and argues that the imagined communities are not arbitrary creatures of the imagination but depend upon indirect social relationships (ibid. 108). He further argues that communication technologies and modern mass media play an especially important role in the constitution of these imagined communities. The problem with Calhoun is that he does not seem to differentiate sufficiently between how communication technologies and mass media function. He argues that television and mass media offer extraordinary potential for furthering the creation of imagined communities, but also communication media "facilitate powerful mechanisms of coordination of action through indirect relationships (…)" (ibid. 110).

Terje Rasmussen, however, separates between mass media and communication technologies, although emphasises that rigid distinctions are futile (Rasmussen: 2000: 121). His point is that there are contextual differences between the use of mass media and communication technologies. Whereas mass media settles a break between producers and receivers of information, communication technologies enable bi-directional communication (ibid. 122-123). Communication technologies are empty and filled with a verbal interchange of meaning between active participants. According to Rasmussen, true communication can only take place in such bi-directional interactions. Due to the occasional imagined personal style of mass media and the lack of possibility of feedback, a situation of pseudo-communication between the producers and receivers of information takes place, where the receivers enter into an imagined communication process with the

medium/message (ibid. 122-123). A clearer differentiation of communication technologies and mass media is necessary to emphasise how they function. Calhoun does not deny that indirect personal communication facilitates true personal relationships, only that they do not result in true locally compact communities. Still, Rasmussen's specifications are valuable, as they make clear that communication technologies, in contrast to mass media, facilitate true personal relationships. These relationships are mediated, but the result is in any case true dialogical communication.

There is obviously a difference between mass media and mass communication technologies and *interpersonal* communication technology devices. Interpersonal communications whether direct or mediated, are useful for creating and maintaining true interpersonal relations. James Beniger (2001), nevertheless, makes a point of how these matters are not always self-evident. Internet devices such as email can be used for mass communication and create a feeling of intimacy and personal relationships. The crucial point is that such imagined relationships are very easy to create with internet devices. Computer mediated communication is not always dialogic and does not always facilitate interpersonal relationships.

The concept of community must be carefully used and what it signifies must be explained. However, using the concept of communities has become quite usual in the context of new communication technologies. In this inquiry it should be clear that the purpose of using the concept is not to imply that computer mediated communication facilitates communities in Calhoun's locally compact sense formed out of direct relationships among their members (Calhoun 1991: 107). Calhoun would probably object to how the concept of community is used in this thesis in the first place, and the idea that there exists a common-Burmese community. As emphasised earlier in the thesis, community is here comprehended as social networks and associations based on some common characteristics. It might have been a better idea though, to only use networks, relationships and associations as these concepts are not as disputed as communities.

7.4 THE VALUE OF ANALYTICAL GENERALISATIONS

There have been a number of interesting findings throughout the analysis. Nonetheless their generalising capacities are limited to concern the theories used. This is not to say that analyses of this kind are without value, or that the point of arrival is nothing more than the point of departure. Indications have been given to what the picture looks like and what

questions could be asked in forthcoming studies. Several hypotheses can be derived based on what the interviews illustrate, what patterns they point towards, and what questions they rise. The knowledge gap hypothesis is only one possibility. Another interesting question would have been to pay further attention to the transparency of the net. This was only briefly commented in 6.3.3, where the politically active respondents illustrate that they do not consider the net to be safe enough for handling delicate matters. Discovering new and unexpected results are therefore an equally important part of exploratory case studies as following and elaborating on anticipated patterns. Like any other researcher I have had to accept that individual, social and political phenomena cannot be comprehended by existing theories alone. This is an especially important recognition in this thesis, as it might seem that various theoretical perspectives are given an underlying emphasis. Empirical research will necessarily get elevated theories on the ground.

The fairly optimistic picture this analysis indicates has to be evaluated in relation to other research projects that in a greater degree focus on more problematic and negative aspects of information- and communication technologies. The interviewees emphasise the importance of a critical mind and of comparing various information sources. Although this inquiry aims at giving an objective presentation of the case, the reader is encouraged to use the critical mind that the interviewees quite clearly illustrate that they use.

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APPENDIX I

Acronyms

AFPFL	the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CMC	Computer mediated communication
DAB	Democratic Alliance of Burma
DVB	Democratic Voice of Burma
ILO	International Labour Organization
MUD	Multi-User Dungeon or Multi-User Domain
NLD	National League for Democracy
RSF	Reporters san frontier
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SMNC	State Clergy Co-ordination Committee
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
TCP/IP	Transmission Control Protocol/ Internet Protocol
VOA	Voice of America
WML	Wolfgang Memorial Library

Messenger as a synchronous mode of computer mediated communication

I have had many conversations with Burmese in Messenger. The extract below is from a relatively intense conversation with a 19-year-old male Burmese student in New York, with whom I have had a number of interesting chats.

b: i don't like burmese haters
h_marika: how hates the Burmese?
h_marika: I don't know anyone who does
b: i'll kill them b4 i'll blow up the world
b: you
h_marika: I'm sorry but really I don't
h_marika: you know I don't
b: you said we are in exile
b: you know what that mean
h_marika: some of you are. I've talked to quite a few who are.
h_marika: what does it mean to be in exile
b: we are not in exile
h_marika: how come some say they are then
b: they don't know the truth
h_marika: what is the truth?
b: the truth is we move cause we want most ppl who move to other country are the rich fat ppl
b: most of us are not ban from the country
h_marika: I know
b: we can go back when we want
h_marika: So do you want to go back
b: of course
h_marika: when?
b: few months
h_marika: most of the Burmese I've interviewed want to go back
b: most of them doesn't represent us
h_marika: I was in London in November. Did nine interviews there
h_marika: who are us
b: the true burmese
b: you interview the chinese burmese they don't have no pride in our nation
h_marika: All of them said they had
b: all they care about is money

Mostly, the conversations I have had in messenger have concerned social matters. I have chosen to quote this conversation, not because it is an eminent example of how rational discussions should be, but because it illustrates the lively and dialogic nature of these types of conversations. At least two of my conversations with b have concerned being in exile or

not, and he has surely made me understand that all Burmese in foreign countries are not in exile. B seems, however, to be of the opinion that Burmese who have fled their country are traitors and do not deserve to be called Burmese. Then again, b usually finds it amusing to provoke me and make me feel uncomfortable. I know b only from conversations in messenger, and I cannot guarantee that what he says is what he means at all times.

APPENDIX III

The Interviewees

Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Occupation	Experience with the internet	Locality
Female	30	Burman	Web-editor at DVB	Uses the net a lot both personally and work-related. The net serves almost as a free-space	Oslo
Male	30	Karen	Technician at DVB	Uses the net a lot both personally and work-related. Keeps in touch with family and friends	Oslo
Male	36	Burman	Journalist/reporter	Uses the net a lot both personally and work-related. Keeps in touch with family and friends.	Oslo
Male	42	Burman	Monk	Uses the net a lot. Mostly religious and political purposes.	London
Male	24	Burman	Student	Not a lot of experience but uses the net for emailing and for news about Burma.	London
Male	37	Burman/Chan	Just finished studies, Burmese activist	Uses the net a lot both personally and in pro-democracy activity.	London
Male	29	Burman	Student	Uses the net mostly for studies but also for news about Burma.	London
Female	22	Burman/Karen	Student/teacher	Uses the net a lot to keep in touch with Burmese friends and keep up with Burma.	London
Male	53	Burman	Doctor, co-ordinator for a part of NLD	Uses the net a lot and almost exclusively for political purposes.	London
Female	22	Burman	Student	Uses the net a lot to keep in touch with Burmese friends. Also interested in the political issues.	London
Female	27	Burman	Student	Uses the net a lot to keep in touch with Burmese friends. Also uses for her studies.	London
Male	25	Burman	Student/works at BBC	Uses the net a lot for political and especially religious purposes.	London

APPENDIX IV

Interview guide

Your answers and views will help me understand what significance the Internet has in your life, both when it comes to information and communication. Exploring how you use the Internet is very interesting, as the Internet has several characteristics, which might be useful for people in exile. I will not use your name in the interview, and I will not reveal your identity. I will fully respect any reservations you have for not wanting to talk about certain issues.

In my study of exile-Burmese and the Internet, I define the Internet as *computer networks*, where people may publicise information and communicate through email, chat and online communities.

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

(i) How old are you?
(ii) Gender
(iii) What is your ethnical background?
(iv) Where do you live?
(v) What do you do? Occupation

2. STATISTICS ON HOW MUCH YOU USE THE INTERNET

(i) When was your **first experience** with the Internet?
What was it like and what did you think?

(ii) How many times a week are you connected to the Internet?
For **how long** are you connected to the Internet?

(iii) **Why** do you use the Internet?

(iv) Are there any specific sites you follow regularly?
What sites and how do you characterise them?
Why do you follow these sites?

(v) Do you surf the web?
Do you use e-mails?
Do you use chat?
Message-boards?
Messengers?
Subscribe to newsletters about Burma?

3. MORE SPECIFIC ON USE

(i) How do you **experience** the internet?
How do you like communicating with e-mail, chat, ICQ, messenger?

(ii) How is **using** the Internet different from using other media?
What is good about it and what is not so good?

How would you describe having the possibility to use the Internet in relation to the situation before you had access to the Internet?

(iii) How much of your use of the Internet can be related to **Burma**?
How would you keep up if you didn't have access to the internet?

Do Burmese people use the internet differently than other people?
How and why?

Does the internet have a different purpose for Burmese than for other people?

(iv) What do you **value** more? The information side or the communication side of Internet?
That you can find a lot of information about your country or
That you can keep in touch with other Burmese?

Why are these possibilities important?

(v) Do you ever feel **insecure** when using the Internet?
Are you afraid that your online activity might be traced?
How do you feel about giving away personal information on the Internet?
Do you prefer an anonymous identity online?
Why?

4. ONLINE COMMUNITY

(i) Do you have **friends** you have met on the Internet?
How did you meet them?
How do you keep in touch? How often?

How are these **relationships**? Just like any other friends?
More open or problematic distance?

(ii) Is it important for you to feel you're a part of a Burmese community?
Why?
Do you think the Internet helps to maintain a Burmese **community**?
How?

(iii) Do you think the Internet has affected the Burmese community,
>locally?

>internationally?
Sense of belonging?
Made **co-operation** across borders easier?
Political and cultural **enlightenment** of Burmese and the public in general?

(iv) Is it important to maintain your social and cultural **identity** as a Burmese?
Why? How?

Does using the Internet mean anything for your identity as a Burmese?
Why and how?

(v) What are your conversations/e-mails about?
How do e-mails differ from chatting?
More or less **dialogic**?
How do chats differ depending on who you're talking to?

(vi) Does anybody complain and think you use **too much time** on the Internet?

(vii) Do you communicate less with people who are located geographically far away (communication on the Internet)?
Is it important that you have a chance of meeting people you are communicating with?

(viii) Do you chat, use **ICQ** or different messengers?
Do you prefer private or public groups?

(ix) Do you **experience communication** on the Internet different from having a meeting face-to-face?
What do you think of email, ICQ, message-boards, chat-groups or different messengers?
Are the conversations and dialogues different in any way?

(x) How do you value the possibility to take part in the different chat-groups and message boards online?

(xi) What **kind of chats** do you attend more often? Political, social, cultural, entertainment, non-Burmese?

(xii) How do you react when you meet people online with meanings and values different from you?
>Do you ignore them, end the discussions
>Keep on discussing

5. INFORMATION

(i) Do you **trust** information found on the Internet?
How do know how to trust information you find on the Internet?

(ii) Do you easily **find** what you are looking for on the Internet?

(iii) Do you ever feel **overwhelmed** by the massive amount of information?
How do you cope with the massive amount of information?

(iv) Do you feel inhabited by poor knowledge and too little know-how?
Do you know enough English?

(v) How do you consider the chances for a **democratic** development in Burma?

(How) do you think the internet can contribute in a democratisation process?

6. ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND

(vi) Can you tell me about your **background from Burma**?
What did you do?
How did you experience living under such tight conditions?

(vii) Can you tell me **why you had to leave** Burma?
How old were you?
Did you flee with family or friends?

(viii) How would you describe having to leave dear people and knowing that keeping in touch would be difficult.